THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END
by TurtleMe
EARLY YEARS
VOLUME ONE

THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

BOOK 1: EARLY YEARS

TURTLEME

CONTENTS

Prologue
1. The Light at the End of the Tunnel
2. The Encyclopedia of Mana Manipulation
3. Head Start
4. My Life Now
5. Let the Journey Begin
6. Up the Mountain
7. How I Wished
8. Questions
9. Ones Held Dear
10. Road Ahead
11. To and Fro
12. Meeting
13. Q & A
14. What's to Come
15. Next Step
16. Companion
17. Family
18. Peaceful
19. Proclamation
20. Everybody Wins
21. For Them

PROLOGUE

THE CONTINENT of Dicathen comprises three major kingdoms: the forest kingdom of Elenoir in the north, the underground kingdom of Darv near to the southern border, and the kingdom of Sapin, located on the eastern border of the continent. There also exist the Beast Glades, of which a large percentage remains a mystery. Not much of the Beast Glades has been traversed due to the abundance of beasts, which are hostile to travelers as well as each other. Yet, every year, countless expeditions have been made due to the tempting riches one may reap…

flip

…The kingdom of Elenoir, the homeland of the elf race, is located in the Forest of Elshire. The thick mist that forms here—a mysterious effect of the centuries-old trees—deters all travelers; however, the elves, with their acute senses, can navigate freely…

flip

…The kingdom of Darv is a network of underground passages and enormous caves that can span up to several kilometers, wherein the Dwarven race resides...

flip

…The kingdom of Sapin is easily the largest and most populated region on the continent. While this kingdom is primarily composed of humans, there are also numerous merchants from the Dwarven race, trading commodities of

many…

flip

…While the Beast Glades house countless monsters and creatures, they also contain wondrous treasures with long-forgotten origins, accessible to those who dare to seek them. Many adventurers and mercenaries have written about the dungeons and lairs of powerful entities and the riches to be found therein, which can turn even the most generous priest into a greedy...

flip

...Between the Forest of Elshire and the kingdom of Sapin lies the Grand Mountain range, which spans roughly ninety percent of the continent, separating the north and east from the west and south...

flip

...While the kingdoms of Darv and Sapin hold a symbiotic relationship for resources, the elves seclude themselves, displaying aggression toward every other…

flip

Closing the worn covers of what seemed to be an encyclopedia of this world, Arthur rubbed the bridge of his nose with his pudgy fingers, downcast. An almost tangible gloom emanated from him. He let out an audible half-sigh, which seemed appropriate from his toothless mouth.

“Ah, fu…”

1

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

I NEVER BELIEVED in the whole "light at the end of the tunnel" folly where people, after having a near-death experience, would startle awake in a cold sweat exclaiming, "I saw the light!"

But there I was, in this so-called "tunnel" facing a glaring light, when the last thing I remembered was sleeping in my room—the royal bedchamber, as others called it.

Had I died? If so, how? Was I assassinated?

I didn't remember wronging anyone, but then again, being a powerful public figure meant others had all sorts of reasons to want me dead.

The pressure forcing me toward this mysterious light made me forgo the hope that this was all a dream. Instead, I relaxed—that seemed to make things more comfortable—and went along for the ride.

The journey seemed to take an eternity. I half-expected to hear, at any moment, a choir of children singing an angelic hymn, beckoning me toward what I hoped would be heaven. Instead, as if I were looking through a foggy window, everything around me turned into a bright blur, forcing me to shut my eyes. Indiscernible sounds assaulted my ears, making me dizzy. When I tried to speak, the words came out as a cry.

The cacophony of indistinguishable sounds slowly mellowed, and I heard a muffled voice saying, "Congratulations, sir and madam, he's a healthy boy."

...Wait.

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I suppose I should have been coming to the conclusion that I had just experienced the miracle of birth firsthand, but I was momentarily overcome by the thought of my own demise. I couldn't be dead, though, if I was just being born, could I?

Assessing my situation in the rational manner befitting a king, I made note, first of all, that wherever this was, I understood the language. That was a good sign.

I slowly and painfully opened my eyes once more, and they were bombarded with different colors and figures. It took a bit of time for my infant eyes to get used to the light. A not-so-appealing face moved into my line of sight—a man with long, greying hair on both his head and chin, wearing a pair of thick glasses. He seemed to be the doctor, but he wasn't wearing a doctor's gown, nor were we in anything remotely close to a hospital room. I seemed to have been born from some satanic summoning ritual, because we were on a bed of straw, on the floor of a small room dimly lit by a few candles.

I looked around and saw the woman who had clearly just given birth to me. It seemed reasonable to call her 'Mother.' Taking a few more seconds to see what she looked like, I had to admit she was a beauty, though that might have been due to my still-bleary eyes. Rather than glamorous, I would better describe her as lovely, in a very kind and gentle sense. She had striking auburn hair and brown eyes, long eyelashes, and a perky nose, and I felt an urge to just cling to her. She exuded an irresistible maternal warmth, and I wondered if all babies felt this instinctive bond with their mothers.

I peeled my eyes away and looked at the person standing to my right. By the idiotic grin and teary eyes he gazed at me with, I assumed he was my father. Immediately he said, "Hi, little Art, I'm your daddy. Can you say *dada*?" I glanced around to see both my mother and the doctor roll their eyes as my mother managed to scoff, "Honey, he was just born."

Taking a closer look at my father, I could see why my lovely mother was attracted to him. Aside from the few loose screws he seemed to have,

expecting a newborn to articulate a two-syllable word—I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and believe he had been overcome with the joy of becoming a father—he was a very charismatic-looking man with a cleanly-shaven, square jawline that complemented his features. His hair, ashy brown in color, was kept trim, while his eyebrows were strong and fierce, extending sharply like two swords. Yet his eyes held a gentle quality, perhaps imparted by the way they drooped a bit at the outside corners, or the deep blue, almost sapphire, hue of his irises.

I heard my mother's voice ask, "Doctor, why isn't he crying? I thought newborns were supposed to cry."

While I finished studying my presumptive parents, the bespectacled gentleman who called himself a doctor dismissed my mother's worry, saying, "There are cases where the infant does not cry. Please continue resting for a couple of days, Mrs. Leywin. Mr. Leywin, I'll be available in case you need me for anything." And that marked the first day of a new life.

The weeks following my journey out of the tunnel were a new kind of torture for me. I had little to no motor control, other than being able to wave my limbs around, and even that got tiring quickly. I soon realized that babies don't really have much control over their fingers. When you place your finger on a baby's palm, they don't grab it because they like you; they grab it because it's like getting hit in the funny bone. It's a reflex. Forget motor control; I couldn't even excrete my wastes at my discretion. I was not yet the master of my own bladder.

The satanic demon-summoning place seemed to be my parents' room. As best I could tell, I seemed to have traveled back in time to be born into my own world, in the days before electricity had been invented. At least, that was what I hoped—but my mother quickly proved me wrong.

My idiotic father had been swinging me around one day and bumped me against a drawer, scratching my leg. And my mother healed it.

No, not like 'a bandage and a kiss' healing—this was a full-blown, shining-

light-with-a-faint-hum-from-her-freaking-*hands* type of healing.

Where the hell am I?

My mother and father—Alice and Reynolds Leywin—seemed to be good people. Hell, possibly even the best. I suspected my mother was an angel; I'd never met such a kindhearted, warm person. She frequently took me with her to what she called a town, carrying me on her back in a baby cradle-strap of some sort. This town, called Ashber, was more like a glorified outpost in my opinion, seeing as there were no real roads or buildings. We walked along the main dirt trail, which featured tents on both sides with various merchants and salesmen selling all sorts of things—from common, everyday necessities to things I couldn't help but raise a brow at, like weapons, armor, and rocks… shining rocks!

Probably in an attempt to help me learn the language faster, my mother talked to me while shopping for the day's groceries and exchanging pleasantries with various people passing by or working in the booths. But it was never long before my body turned against me once again and I fell asleep… Damn this useless infantile form of mine.

I woke in my mother's lap. She was caressing me absently, intently focused on my father. He was reciting a chant, and continued for well over a minute, something that sounded like a prayer to the earth. I leaned in closer and closer, almost falling off my living seat, expecting some magical phenomenon like an earthquake splitting the ground or a giant stone golem emerging. After what seemed like an eternity—and for an infant with the attention span of a goldfish, it was—three boulders, each the size of an adult human, emerged from the ground and slammed against a nearby tree.

What in the name of... That was it?

I flailed my arms in anger, but my idiot father interpreted that as excitement. With a big grin on his face, he said, "Your daddy is awesome, huh?"

Whatever magic he had accomplished with the boulders, he was undoubtedly much better at fighting. When he put on his iron gauntlets, even I was

impressed, despite my experience fighting top-notch experts in my past. With quick, firm movements that were surprising for his bulky build, his fists carried enough force to shatter boulders and topple down trees, but were fluid enough to not leave any openings for an opponent. In my former world, he would have been classed as a high-tier fighter, leading a squad of soldiers, but to me, he was just my father.

The days passed quickly, and I drank in as much information as I could, listening intently to my parents and observing everything I could see. Every day I devoted myself to honing my new body, mastering the motor functions residing deep within me.

That comfortable regimen soon changed.

2

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MANA MANIPULATION

I WAS A KING. In my former life I could have had my country's army assembled and kneeling at my feet with the snap of a finger. I'd outdueled competitors from other countries as well as my own people to settle disputes and maintain my position. In terms of swordsmanship and controlling ki, I was second to none, for in my previous world, personal strength was essential to being a ruler. Yet I couldn't think of a moment in my two lives when I'd been prouder than I was now.

I can crawl!

Until now, although I was thirsty for knowledge about this new world, I'd had to make do with the stories Mother would tell me while trying to make me fall asleep, and I often grumbled in complaint when she stopped too early. My father would sometimes sit me on his lap while idly talking to me about his past exploits, which gave me some hints as to what kind of world this was and what it was filled with.

From what I had learned so far, this world seemed to be a fairly straightforward one filled with magic and warriors, where power and wealth decided one's rank in society. In that sense, it wasn't too different from my old world, except for the lack of technology and the slight difference between this world's magic and the ki, or life force, of my previous world.

My father, Reynolds Leywin, was a former adventurer—which was apparently a viable occupation in this world—and had quite a lot of

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experience in his field. He had taken part in several expeditions to search for treasure and fulfill missions he and his team acquired from the Adventurers Guild. He'd eventually settled down when he met my mother at the kingdom's border in a city called Valden. He proudly told me how my mother, Alice, had fallen head over heels for him at first sight when he had visited the town's Adventurers Guild Hall, where she had been working, but I suspected it was the exact opposite considering how my mother slapped him across the back of the head and told him to stop telling me lies.

I'd learned my full name by now: Arthur Leywin—Arthur after my great-grandfather, from the days when the Leywin house was far more powerful. My parents called me Art for short; as a former king I thought that sounded a little too cute, but after getting a glimpse of myself one day in the metal sheet they used as a mirror, I had to admit my physical features would make anyone think of me as 'cute.' I had my mother's glowing auburn hair, while my eyes were a bright azure color, inherited from my father. I couldn't know how my facial features would turn out as I grew older, but as long as I kept myself in good fighting shape, it should be okay.

I'd spent weeks attempting to crawl but had achieved only an uncoordinated scuffle in place. When I finally succeeded, I managed to sneak into the family's library while my mother was hanging the laundry out to dry. Once she noticed I was gone, it took her only a few minutes to find me. It wouldn't have mattered even if I'd had hours inside the room, though, because once I opened up a book I realized that, while I understood the spoken language, I couldn't read.

I felt as frustrated as my out-of-breath mother sounded when she scolded me with a sigh, saying, "I swear, you're going to be as much of a handful as your father."

By the end of the week, I had picked up enough words from my mother's nightly story-reading to do some studying of my own in the library. Within a

few weeks, Mother had grown used to finding me holed up in the corner of the library with books around me. Whether she was suspicious, I didn't know, but she did let me stay there as long as she was close by and the door was open.

I'd spent the afternoon finishing up the fifth volume of an encyclopedia of Dicathen, my new world. I closed the encyclopedia and situated myself more comfortably on the ground. Basically I just lay on my belly, because crawling and sitting upright were so damn tiring.

Pondering over what I had just read, I realized this world was rather underdeveloped. From what I could infer, there wasn't much in the way of technological advancement. The only sources of transportation appeared to be horse-driven carriages, which varied in size for local and overland use, and ships with sails, for navigating rivers.

Weapons were freely allowed, and not regulated unless you were visiting the royal family or some other high-ranking authority. It continued to baffle me to see people carrying weapons while shopping for groceries, like they were luxury designer bags. In town with my mother, I had witnessed a man carrying a gigantic war axe so tall its handle dragged on the ground behind him as he walked.

In my previous life, on Earth, there were soldiers and guards who carried weapons openly; however, they weren't for the purpose of killing, but rather to deter people from committing crimes. Here, though, I had recently witnessed a thief stealing a few items from the armory store, then being slashed in the back by a large, bald mercenary carrying a polearm. Moreover, the bystanders even went as far as to applaud the oversized skinhead while the thief lay there dying.

One similarity between this world and my previous world was the system of monarchy. The continent of Dicathen had several kingdoms, each ruled by a king and his royal family. Unlike Earth of my time, though, the kings here were chosen based on lineage; the title passed down from the king to his son

and so on.

Crowns had once been inherited on Earth, too, but centuries ago the hierarchical systems had adopted a new approach to leadership. Earth rulers were still kings; however, they weren't born or elected, but trained. Wars had become an almost obsolete form of settling disputes between countries. Of course, there were still smaller-scale battles, and armies were still needed for the safety of the citizens, but disputes concerning the wellbeing of a country were based on either a duel between the rulers of the countries—limited to making use of ki and close-combat weapons—or, for smaller disputes, a mock battle between platoons, where limited firearms were allowed. Therefore, a king on Earth was no longer the stereotypical fat man sitting on the throne ignorantly commanding others; to protect his country's safety and honor, he had to be an unparalleled fighter.

Scanning through the encyclopedia, there didn't seem to be much information on continents other than the one we were currently on. I found this a bit odd, since there were ships that carried goods and passengers across the continent by river, but I assumed that the maritime technology wasn't yet developed enough to sail across oceans.

One thing that was hard to get used to was the existence of magic in this world. If we were talking about superhuman powers, sure, the countries on Earth relied on such people, but the capabilities of magic in this world seemed to be on another level.

On Earth, practitioners learned how to condense and utilize the ki that existed innately in their bodies. Like building muscle through exercise, repeatedly breaking the ki center down through the depletion of the ki inside, followed by rest, would cause the ki center to grow stronger, allowing access to a bigger pool of ki, which could then be channeled throughout the body via special veins known as meridians, and utilized to strengthen the body.

Instead of ki, this world's life force was called mana; the more surprising thing was that it existed in the atmosphere. Practitioners, also known as

mages, would draw the surrounding mana into their bodies to use, ultimately condensing it in their mana core. In my old world, ki only existed and formed inside the body. Whether ki had never existed in Earth's atmosphere in the first place, or had ceased to exist for some reason, I would never know.

On Earth, practice was incredibly important, but the innate size of a user's ki center was even more important, because the limited amount of ki you had in your body was all you could work with. This made me wonder if the size of a person's mana core wouldn't matter as much here because of the available mana in the atmosphere. The 'cup' might not hold as much, but it could be constantly replenished.

In my old world, even though my ki center wasn't large, I had been considered a prodigy at channeling and utilizing my ki effectively to make up for my shortcomings. By utilizing every bit of my ki, I had become the strongest of the elite division of duelists, earning the right to become king.

If I could apply a ki practitioner's techniques to the mana that was present both inside the mana core and in the surrounding atmosphere, couldn't I essentially double or even triple the strength I'd had before?

I managed to pull another book from the bottom shelf—*The Beginner's Guide for the Privileged Mage*—which answered a couple of questions for me:

...While the power to control mana is largely genetic, there are many cases where children of mages are unable to sense the mana around them. A recent census showed that roughly one in one hundred children is able to sense mana, but the extent of this ability can only be tested after the mana core has completely developed, which occurs in early adolescence to the late teen years. A mage's first awakening will be apparent by the initial repellence of the surrounding mana when the mana core manifests. This results in a translucent barrier forming for several minutes around the awakened...

Flipping through the pages, I found something that caught my attention.

...Mana can be used in various ways. The two most common methods of

utilizing mana are augmenting (enhancement of the body with mana), and conjuring (emission of mana to the outside world)…

…Augmenting is most commonly seen amongst warriors who utilize mana, channeling it through their body to strengthen themselves and their attacks...

…Conjuring is practiced by mages, who, after channeling their mana, can cast spells to have a certain effect on the surrounding area or directly at a target...

I flipped a few pages to the chapter titled 'Weaknesses and Limitations' and continued reading.

While augmenters can possess incredible strength, defense, and agility, their weakness lies in their limited range…

…Conjurers possess unfathomable powers, being able to bend their surroundings to their will. However, such powers come with limits. Unlike augmenters, who utilize mostly the mana in their own mana cores, conjurers must supplement their own mana core with mana from the outside world in order to influence their surroundings in the form of a spell...

…While both types of mages—mana manipulators, to use the more scientifically accurate term—are ranked by the strength of their mana cores, augmenters and conjurers have different ways of measuring their aptitude...

flip

…An augmenter's prowess or talent is measured by the strength of the mana channels in their body, which measures the speed and efficiency of relocation of mana from their mana core into various parts of their bodies…

…A conjurer's power and talent, by contrast, is measured by the power of their mana veins, which indicates their speed and effectiveness in absorbing mana from the outside world to cast a spell...

flip

…Mages (mana manipulators) are typically divided into one of these two categories, since attempting to be proficient in both from an early stage is time-consuming and often unsuccessful. Categorization is based on the

relative strength of the individual's mana channels and mana veins, and the differences are generally present at birth…

… Augmenters do not need very strong mana veins, as they predominantly utilize mana from their cores, while conjurers do not need powerful mana channels, because they do not release their mana into their own bodies.

As proficiency rises to an advanced level, the distinctions between augmenters' and conjurers' abilities lessen naturally…

I took a minute to digest this new information. It seemed my idiot father was a decently competent augmenter and a less-than-average conjurer.

That healing light, though… What was my mother?

flip, flip, flip

Aha!

…There are rare deviants, the two best-known types of which are elemental deviants and emitters. The most highly sought-after are emitters, more commonly known as healers. Healers possess the rare ability to cast their unique restorative mana onto others directly, expediting recovery from injuries and impairments...

While I knew her powers were different, I'd had no idea they were so rare.

After resting my weary eyes for a few minutes, I skipped a few pages to go to the next chapter, titled 'Fundamentals of Conjuring.'

The proper steps of utilizing mana for conjurers are: gathering mana; drawing it into one's body; circulating it into one's mana core to stabilize and purify the diluted mana from the atmosphere; then channeling it into an appropriate conductor (a staff, wand, ring, etc.) using incantations as a mental control for shaping the mana into the desired spell…

flip

…The more powerful the spell, the longer it will take to draw in surrounding mana, condense and purify it in the mana core, and finally channel and release…

flip

...Because conjuring involves exerting focused mana into a particular spell, conjurers will notice that they have a special aptitude for certain elements (air, water, fire, earth), but with proper training, can become adequate in the basics of all elements...

flip, flip

Fundamentals of Augmenting

Compared to conjuring, much less time can be spent gathering the surrounding mana for augmenting. Efficiency in augmenting requires speed and precision in the use of core mana, and less use of mana from the atmosphere...

This was where it clicked: Augmenting was very similar to using ki, except you could also draw mana in from your surroundings. The reason there weren't any conjurers on my old world, Earth, was because there was no mana in the atmosphere to draw from to create a phenomenon.

My gaze sharpened as I read on.

...augmenting requires precise distribution of mana into different parts of the body, as the user requires. Although it may seem simple at a glance, augmenting requires significant insight into one's own body. Being able to utilize the mana channels efficiently requires years of both mental and physical practice...

flip

...Because augmenting involves extracting mana in its purest form from the user's mana core, there are no significant distinctions in an elemental sense at an early stage. However, augmenters are able to use their mana in more diverse ways, resulting in vastly different forms of fighting through augmentation...

flip

...The phenomenon called 'backlash' is known to both types of practitioners. For augmenters, it occurs from depletion of the mana core and can cause extreme bodily pain, depending on how severe the damage to the mana core

is. For conjurers, backlash occurs from overfilling of the mana core. This is caused by overuse of spells beyond the practitioner's capacity, or by using a spell too powerful for his or her mana core to handle.

Closing the book, I propped myself up on my butt, processing the overload of information I had just read.

Because of the uncanny similarities between the ki center in my old world and the mana core in this world, I found it hard to believe that mana manipulation could not begin until adolescence. On Earth, children could meditate and sense the ki scattered inside their bodies. Once the ki migrated to a single place, the ki center would form.

Testing my hypothesis, I began meditating, trying to sense the mana in my seven-month-old body. Then—

"There you are! Art, honey, are you having trouble taking a poopy?"

Mother! I'm about to begin my journey to become the greatest mage in the world! Do not make me out to be a constipated infant!

Lifting me gently into her arms, she took me away to change my diaper—which, surprisingly, was full by the time I noticed.

3

HEAD START

ALICE LEYWIN

Arthur was the most adorable baby. Some mothers are besotted with their babies even if they're homely, but that wasn't the case with me.

No.

Arthur had a scruffy little patch of glowing auburn hair, playful eyes that seemed to radiate blue light, and his gaze at times was almost… intelligent. But I wasn't besotted. I planned to be a strict and just mother. I knew I couldn't rely on my husband to teach little Art any common sense. For God's sake, he'd tried to teach my baby how to fight when he could barely crawl.

I knew the little rascal would turn out just like his father if I let him. When he started crawling, I was so proud I was on the verge of tears, but I didn't know how much of a handful he'd be as he became more mobile.

I couldn't take my eyes off him for a single moment before he'd crawl into the study room. It was very strange. We made sure to buy him lots of stuffed animals and wooden toys to play with, but he always ended up going to the study room. In that, at least, he was the direct opposite of his father—Reynolds shied away from texts longer than the weekly newspaper.

My son seemed interested in a lot of things. I couldn't get enough of seeing his head, so disproportionate to his little body, turning left and right while trying to take in everything around him. Seeing how excited Art got when we went out to town, I began doing the shopping every other day instead of twice

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a week.

No, I was *not* besotted with him. It was just for his education regarding the outside world and for fresh food in the house. Nothing more than that.

He was particularly intrigued by his father's practicing. Reynolds had been a competent adventurer back in the day—he was a B-class adventurer by the age of twenty-eight, which was a pretty fast climb. To keep from sending eager but ignorant adolescents to their deaths, the Adventurers Guild, where I worked as a medic-in-training, required applicants to pass a test before acquiring their E-class rank—the lowest. As for the higher ranks, I'd only seen a couple of A-class adventurers in my years of working there, and I had never seen an S-class adventurer, though I assumed they did exist.

Working at the Adventurers Guild—or what we just called the Guild Hall—back then in Valden, I got to see too many eager teens. Once I was assigned to proctor a basic practical exam, where the examinee had to simply demonstrate fundamental competency in mana manipulation, but before the test even began, the kid fell straight onto his back because the sword he was carrying was too heavy for him! At least they were ambitious, but I was always surprised they didn't float away from having their overly-inflated egos get to their heads.

Reynolds seemed like just another airhead back then. The moment he saw me in the Guild Hall, his jaw literally dropped. He just stood there until the guy in line behind him elbowed him to hurry up, then he managed to mumble, "H-hi… can I trade in th-the stuff for the mission?" I just giggled as he turned beet red from embarrassment.

He finally managed to gather up the courage to ask me out for dinner, and we hit it off from there. Even after five years of being together, I still smiled when I saw his droopy, blue, puppy-eyes looking at me.

Art somehow wound up with the best traits from each of us, making him that much more adorable. You should have seen him when I changed his diapers. For some reason, he'd start turning red in his cheeks every time and cover his

face with his tiny little fingers. I didn't think babies that age could get embarrassed, but that was what it seemed like.

But one of the best moments of all had to be when he said his first word: 'mama.'

He said 'mama' first!

I told him to say it again and again, just to make sure I didn't hear wrong, and Reynolds sulked for the entire day because Art said 'mama' before 'dada.'

I put on a stern face and reprimanded Reynolds for being so childish, but I secretly relished the fact that I had won.

I was so content in those months, with my son close by me wherever I went. Together, we would frequently watch through the window as his father practiced after dinner. I was glad Reynolds had given up being an adventurer and taken the post as a town guard instead. Being an adventurer might have brought in more money, but not knowing when or if my husband would come home was not worth any amount of extra money. Especially after what had happened on our last quest together.

Little Art never got sick, but I often found him sitting motionless with his eyes closed. At first, I thought he might be having trouble relieving himself, but that didn't seem to be the case. It was strange, and I didn't know what to make of it. I'd thought babies that age were supposed to be energetic and flighty, but he seemed to expend most of his energy escaping to the study room, only to sit there, perfectly still—almost as if he was meditating.

I worried at first, but although it happened a couple of times a day, it only lasted for a few minutes, and Art always seemed strangely happy afterward. The way he held his arms up and looked up at me made me just want to gobble him up.

Ahem. But I was *not* besotted.

ARTHUR

Two years had passed since I'd made my first difficult journey to the study room.

Since then, I had been constantly gathering the little bits of mana spread out in my body and focusing it, attempting to form a mana core. It was a slow and arduous task. I would have had an easier time learning to walk on my hands and eat with my feet in this damnable body than trying to will my mana core to condense.

It had become clear why the book said it took until adolescence for a person to 'awaken.' If I had let the mana particles in my body move by themselves, it would have taken at least a decade for them to gravitate toward each other enough to form anything remotely close to a mana core.

Instead, having the mental capacity of an adult meant I had the cognitive ability to consciously will my mana particles together. This was something I had done in school in my past life, where they taught you from childhood how to control ki. The key lay in being able to sense the ki—or mana, now—in your own body and force the particles together toward the solar plexus. If left alone, they would eventually slowly float toward each other, like goose-down drifting toward the bottom of an open sack, but I had decided to grab the feathers and shove them into the twill sack, figuratively speaking, instead of waiting for them to float down by themselves.

My daily rituals consisted of trying to spend as much of my limited energy as possible on gathering my mana, while not arousing suspicion in my mother and father. My father seemed to think that being thrown into the air would be quite enjoyable for a child. While I understand that the adrenaline effect might excite some people, when he used mana to reinforce his arms and throw me into the air like a high-speed projectile, the only feelings I had were nausea and a traumatic fear of heights.

Fortunately, my mother had a firm handle on my father, but she scared me sometimes too. I often caught her staring at me, practically drooling, looking at me like I was some kind of premium meat.

I tried to match my behavior to my body by only speaking in very simple sentences, talking just enough to get the point across, no grammar necessary.

The first time I said “mama,” to let her know I wanted more food, she almost burst into tears of joy. It had been a long time since I’d received that sort of motherly affection.

The pace of my training was strenuous and slow, but I was getting a head start compared to everyone else so I wasn’t complaining. The past two years had not gone to waste, for I had finally gathered all my mana into my solar plexus and was in the process of condensing a mana core when...

BOOM

4

MY LIFE NOW

REYNOLDS LEYWIN

My baby boy!

I was so happy we'd had a son. I was eager to start training him—I couldn't remember when I had started training, but I knew I'd been very young. I couldn't wait to teach my baby boy all about magic! I hoped he would turn out to be an augmenter, like his old pops. I knew the basics of conjuring, but couldn't do anything practical with it, except use it as a form of mental exercise.

Alice, on the other hand, was one of the most talented people I'd ever seen. Even as an emitter, she was exceptional. Back when we were just dating, she'd joined my party and we'd gone on missions together. Her restorative power was amazing in and of itself, but I could still remember how shocked I was the day she used an area of effect spell that healed all allies within a five-yard radius. Talk about one of a kind!

And she chose me for her husband.

I'll never get tired of saying that.

In the good old days, before we settled down, we often went into the Beast Glades to hunt for mana beasts. Mana beasts were unique animals—creatures born with the ability to absorb mana into their bodies and create their own mana cores, which we called beast cores.

Beast cores had unlimited uses, making them highly sought after. Of course,

the higher the class of the beast core, the more valuable it was. Mana beast classifications ranged from the E-class, such as the domesticated fanged bull used for meat and leather, to the SS-class monsters. I didn't know much about those—I'd never seen one, nor known anyone who had—but I believed they did exist.

As a rule of thumb, a mana beast was always assumed to be stronger than a human of the same class. This was simply because, even taking mana out of the picture, a beast's physical body was much stronger than a human's.

While the Beast Glades were dangerous, if you were cautious and didn't get lost, it was pretty easy to keep yourself out of trouble. The stronger beasts tended to be down in dungeon-like caves underground or farther away. The first several miles of the Beast Glades were pretty well mapped, and as long as you were at least a C-class adventurer, you could handle the creatures there.

Once in a while, the Guild posted missions requiring multiple parties of adventurers, usually for clearing and mapping the harder dungeons that hadn't yet been fully explored. If a mana beast was strong enough to create its own lair and have other mana beasts serving it, then you could bet there would be treasures to be gained. Questing was exhilarating—the danger added a thrill that you wouldn't find anywhere else. If it weren't for the... the incident with Alice and Lensa, I was sure we wouldn't have settled down as quickly as we did.

I told Art about the adventuring life—all those stories and many more. Alice said I was brainwashing him, but I just wanted him to at least have some experience as an adventurer when he got older.

I didn't know what I'd do if little Art never awakened as a mage. I didn't care how long it took—if he could train to become *any* kind of mage, I knew I would be a proud and happy father.

It was easy to tell what type of mage someone would be when they awakened: While augmenters and conjurers both form a translucent barrier,

the mana behaves differently around them during that time.

Augmenters, when they first awaken, form a sort of pushing force around the barrier, signifying that they have dominant mana channels in their body. Conjurers, on the other hand, form a vacuum of mana around them, which means their mana veins are more dominant. Of course, the degree of the pushing and vacuuming forces depends on their talent in either category.

Not to brag, but when I first awakened—at the early age of twelve, by the way—I was sleeping, and the pushing force made me float for a good couple of minutes. Enough force to lift a human body—imagine that!

I was with Alice in the front yard after dinner, making plans to train Art after his awakening. If he ended up becoming a conjurer, I could get him a tutor from Ashber, since neither Alice nor I were adept enough to be teaching him.

I had barely finished the thought when—

BOOM!

What happened?

Three-quarters of the house was gone. *Art…* Little Art was still in the house...

"*Arthur!*"

The blood drained from Alice's face and her eyes went wide with disbelief and worry. I pushed her down, covering her with a temporary shield that would last for a few minutes.

I rushed toward the explosion, shielding my body with a layer of mana over my skin. The debris from my house came flying toward me as I drew nearer to the source of the explosion. After fighting my way through the scraps of what was left of my house and yard, I saw it.

An all but invisible barrier flickered around my son. It was clear that the pushing force of his awakened powers had caused this explosion. He was floating in the center of a crater that had demolished most of our house, as well as our entire backyard.

My legs gave out. I fell to my knees as I gaped at the sight. My son was almost three years old, and he had awakened. *Only three…*

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Reynolds! Honey!"

I glanced back at my wife, my mouth still hanging open from shock. The debris had stopped flying and she was slowly making her way toward me, taking half-steps and covering her face with her arms to shield herself from the strong pushing force still emanating from Art.

"Reynolds! What happened? What's going on? Where's Art?"

Still unable to find the strength to speak, I simply pointed my finger in the direction of our son.

Confused, she followed the line of my finger. All she could manage to whisper was, "Oh my…"

ARTHUR

Wow. I feel great!

Feeling refreshed by my breakthrough, I closed my eyes to sense my newly formed mana core. My sweet little mana core!

"*Art!* Oh, my baby! Are you okay?"

I jerked my head up to see my mother rushing toward me, while my father knelt on the ground.

What misdeed was Mother punishing him for this time?

My mother lifted me up and hugged me tightly enough that my underdeveloped ribs almost gave out.

I managed to squeal, "Mom, no cry. What's wrong?"

She didn't answer me, just continued sobbing while cradling me. My father came to stand next to her, patting her back and stroking my head, giving me a weak smile.

After a brief moment of confusion, I pulled myself away from my mother's bosom and looked around to see that we were standing in the center of a giant crater. Most of our house was gone.

What the hell? Who did this? Who would have the audacity to destroy the home of a king? The perpetrators will rue this day! I will hunt them down day

and night and not rest until—

"Congratulations, Art, honey," my mother said weakly, while my father exclaimed, "You awakened, Champ."

I was speechless and didn't know what to think. We all looked at each other for a moment as I let it sink in.

I did this?

In my old world, a similar phenomenon occurred when a youth awakened; a clear barrier appeared around the awakened and a small pushing force would surround the barrier. After some thought, I came to the conclusion that the pushing force in this world was much stronger because of the mana in the atmosphere, something that wasn't present back on Earth.

As I had once been a king who prided himself on his integrity, I decided to apologize for this situation.

"I'm sorry, Mom, Dad. Am I in trouble?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized I was so disoriented that I had forgotten to talk like a three-year-old. Fortunately they didn't notice my slip due to their shock.

"No, Art, honey, you're not in trouble. We were just worried about you. I'm glad you're all right." There were tears in my mother's eyes, but she managed to let out a soft chuckle.

My idiot father, on the other hand, was a lot more excited. "My boy is a genius! Awakened before the age of three! This is unprecedented. I thought I was fast, but this is on another level!"

That picture-perfect moment was broken when a neighbor rushed up, shouting, "What in the world?"

"We'd better clean this mess up," my father said as he grinned, rubbing the back of his head.

We decided to keep my awakening a secret. Within a few weeks, my father had managed to contact members of his old adventuring party to help rebuild

our decimated house while we stayed at the nearby inn. With conjurers razing the ground for the foundation and augmenters doing the grunt work, the house didn't take too long to finish. The beauty of magic!

Surprisingly, none of my father's former party members questioned why our house had blown up. That seemed to say a lot about my father.

Spring came to an end midway through the reconstruction of our house, and along with it came my birthday. My parents woke me that morning with a present, and my mother carried what seemed to be a loaf of bread in her hands. Upon closer inspection, I realized it was a cake. I opened the present box to find a carefully carved wooden sword, and I hugged both my parents, thanking them for the present and the cake.

The cake and the gift surprised me; my parents hadn't bothered to celebrate my past two birthdays, so I had assumed this world didn't acknowledge them. I later learned that birthdays are only celebrated beginning at the age of three. It was a tradition from long ago, when babies frequently did not survive their first three years.

How medieval.

Birthday celebrations weren't the only difference between this new world and the world I was from, where children my age would have been getting ready to start school. Seeing children as well as teens working on farms with their family and in forges as apprentice blacksmiths made me realize there was no mandatory, structured education system. Any sort of rudimentary education the children received—the basics, like reading and writing—was provided by their families.

As soon as I turned three, my mother began giving me regular lessons, teaching me how to read and write. Playing the role of a prodigy, I pretended to learn quickly, to her delight. This allowed me to read harder books in the library without drawing suspicion.

These weeks after my awakening passed by in a blast. My father taught me the basics of mana, and how to start training in it, as best as he could. He

tried to simplify as much as possible so a toddler could understand it. If my cognitive abilities hadn't already been on the level of an adult, I don't think I would've retained much, but I did manage to get the basics.

A mage's strength could be easily gauged by looking at the color of his or her mana core. When a person first awakened, the mana core was black, due to the body's blood and other impurities mixing with the mana particles as they come together to form the core. As the mana inside the person's body became purer and imperfections were filtered out, it changed to a dark red color. The color continued to lighten as mana was distilled, going from black to red, then orange, yellow, silver, and then white. The red, orange, and yellow stages each had three sub-stages, classified as 'dark,' 'solid,' and 'light.' As a rule of thumb, the lighter the color of a person's mana core, the purer it was and the more power they had access to.

While the lessons with my father proved useful, I was getting impatient with the pace we were moving at. Within a few days of him beginning to teach me, I asked my mother for books on magic.

My mother still had some connections in the Adventurers Guild, and she managed to acquire a wide collection of books on basic mana manipulation and on fighting with different weapons. Some of them were just picture books with only simple words and illustrations of the basics of mana condensation, but I ignored those. The books I'd been reading were a bit more difficult, but it wasn't until I caught my mother giving me a strange look that I'd realized just how advanced they were. She had brought in books that she expected wouldn't be touched for at least a year and was perplexed by my lack of interest in the simpler texts.

Most of my time was spent taking reading and writing lessons from Mother, and augmenting training with my father. After he covered the basic theory and application of augmenting, we started physical training. Since I was too small to start sparring, we opted for running and body workouts. Seeing my three-year-old body trying to do a pushup must have been the funniest thing,

but my father did a good job of holding back his laughter.

When I wasn't taking lessons from one of my parents, I usually stayed cooped up in the newly remodeled library, reading and meditating to further condense my mana core.

The year passed without much deviation from this routine. Then my father spoke up one night while we were having dinner.

"Honey, I think it's time we get Art a proper mentor."

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5

LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN

A CLANG RESOUNDED in the silence as my mother dropped her fork onto her plate.

"What? Reynolds! Arthur isn't even four yet! No. Besides, you said if our son was an augmenter, *you* would be able to teach him." Mother's desperation was evident in her tone.

"But I never expected he would be this much of a prodigy in mana manipulation," Father responded, much more calmly. "Who's ever heard of an awakening at the age of three?"

"But that means he'll have to leave home. He's not even four, Reynolds! We can't have our baby leave home at such an early age."

"You don't get it. When I observe him while he meditates, I can't help but feel that this all comes naturally to him. Alice, honey, I'm holding my son back by trying to teach him something he can do in his sleep."

Thus began my parents' quarrel.

They went back and forth, basically repeating their initial points; Mother kept saying that I was too young, and Father argued that they couldn't hold me back from reaching my full potential. In the meantime, I was playing a game of war with my food. The peas attacked for the Mother Empire, while the carrots of the Father Nation desperately defended their land.

Finally, as they each ran out of points to back their argument, my father turned to me. "Art, this concerns you, so you have a say as well. How would

you feel about going to a big city and having a teacher?"

I applauded his effort at trying to make this fair, but I didn't think he realized that he was asking a three-year-old to make a decision that would ultimately change his life.

Trying to put an end to their argument, I said, "Can I meet some mentors and ask them if I need to be tutored?"

A tense silence fell over the room as my parents mulled over my suggestion.

Had I stepped on a landmine? Were they mad because I hadn't chosen a side? Having no confidence in my ability to keep a poker face, I looked down and waited for their response.

Thankfully, none of my fears were on their minds. My mother finally spoke, muttering quietly, "We'll at least have his mana core and channels formally tested. We can figure out what to do from there."

My father nodded in agreement, and we began making preparations to leave the very next day.

When I'd made my suggestion, I had assumed we'd be going to a nearby town or city—perhaps a day's travel—to have me tested by a qualified mage. Never had I been so wrong.

The journey would be three weeks long. We would be travelling by horse-drawn carriage through the Grand Mountains to a city called Xyrus.

One of the books I had read popped into my mind. I recalled reading about a floating piece of land, built by an elite organization of conjurers for the sole purpose of housing the prestigious mage academy. A city had later been built around the academy, and both the city and the academy were named after the leader of the organization, Xyrus.

I wondered how it was possible to keep a piece of land, nearly a hundred miles long, afloat. Magnetism? Then the land beneath the city would be affected by it. Did the city have its own gravitational field? It was clear that there was much about this world I didn't understand; perhaps I could find answers in the books in our library, or in a library in Xyrus.

Faced with the prospect of such a long journey, I began to wish this world had sources of transportation like my previous world. In order to get to the city, we'd have to enter through one of the designated teleportation gates in the Grand Mountains. Otherwise, it would easily take months to travel across the continent to reach the gate below the actual city, which floated near the border of the kingdoms of Sapin and Darv.

One reason my father pushed for us to go on this journey now was because his ex-party members were also on their way to the city of Xyrus. Going now, with them, meant we would have three augmenters and two conjurers, along with my mother, who was a rare emitter, and my father, a B-class augmenter. While the mountain range didn't have any mana beasts, there were still the potential dangers of bandits and wild animals.

While my mother and father took care of packing all the necessities, I packed my wooden sword and two books—*The Encyclopedia of Dicathen* and *Foundations of Mana Manipulation*—for the journey.

By mid-morning, we were ready to head out.

After tying my knapsack, filled with my books and a couple of snacks, to my back and strapping my wooden sword to my waist, I grasped my mother's hand and followed my parents to meet their former party members. Although I'd heard about them from time to time from Father, I had never visited the house while they were helping rebuild it, so this would be my first time meeting them.

When we reached the inn at Ashber, we saw them out in front, near the stables. My father rushed to hug his ex-party members, then exclaimed, "Guys, I'd like you all to meet my son, Arthur. Go on, Art, say hello."

Looking up at them as I gave a half-bow, I introduced myself using the most formal speech I thought I could get away with.

"Hello. My father has told me great things about his fellow Twin Horns members. Thank you for traveling with us to Xyrus. We'll be in your hands."

One of the men burst into laughter and said, "What is this? Such manners!

Are you sure he's your son, Rey?" From my father's stories and his red hair, I recognized him as Adam Krensch, an augmenter whose main weapon was the spear.

Taking a closer look at him, he seemed like the energetic, talkative type. Fairly good-looking, he had bright red hair tied into a messy pouf, almost like a flame. His bangs escaped from the hair tie, and he looked like some sort of vagabond. His eyes were bright and seemed to be always laughing. The most noticeable thing about him, though, was the scar across his nose, reaching both cheeks.

As I studied him, I felt myself being lifted and held firmly against something soft while a woman's voice said, "Awww… Isn't he just so precious? You should be glad he doesn't look like you, Reynolds."

Pulling my face away from her breasts, in which she seemed to be trying to suffocate me, I took a good look at the woman. While not as pretty as my mother, she gave off a "royal princess" vibe, with long blond hair that came to a curl at the ends and round, radiant green eyes. She could only be Angela Rose, a conjurer whose specialty, according to my father, was wind magic.

She squeezed me tighter and, just as I began to squirm uncomfortably, a strong pair of hands grabbed me by the knapsack strapped to my back and whisked me away.

"Angela, you're hurting him," a deep voice grunted.

There I hung, like a kitten whose mother had him by the scruff of his neck, unable to move. My eyes remained fixed on the dark-eyed giant who held me suspended in midair. Then he carefully lowered me back onto the ground and tidied my clothes.

How genteel.

I imagined riding on his shoulders the whole way, as if he were a mighty steed. I looked up at him, my eyes getting bigger as I pondered.

Since he was the only other man in the party, I knew he had to be Durden Walker, a conjurer who specialized in earth magic. Standing well over six

feet in height, he had very narrow eyes and eyebrows that slanted down, giving him an almost innocent face compared to his enormous body. A staff was strapped to his back, and the short, scruffy black hair on his head completed his shaggy dog image.

Dusting my clothes off, I turned from the giant to face the woman standing to his left. She looked slightly younger than everyone else. Her straight black hair was partially tied up with a ribbon, and her red, half-open eyes and pursed lips gave her an intense appearance.

“Mhm,” she said brusquely, then gave a slight nod and turned away. Clearly a woman of few words. How charming.

Watching as she walked away toward the stable, I spotted two short daggers strapped to her lower back, just above the hips. The weapons told me that she was Jasmine Flamesworth. My father had told me that her skill as an augmenter paled in comparison to the speed with which she wielded the dual daggers.

The last member of the Twin Horns was Helen Shard. She patted my head lightly and gave me a charming smile. Everything about Miss Helen was sharp: sharp eyes, perky pointed nose, thin red lips, and an angular frame. With her shoulder-length hair tied tightly back, she looked almost boyish. I couldn’t help but be charmed by the charisma the augmenter exuded; she had a ‘we can do anything if we believe’ attitude that seemed to seep from her pores and make her practically glow. Clothed in light leather armor with her bow and arrows strapped to her back, her appearance made me wonder briefly if she might be an elf, but I quickly abandoned that thought after seeing her rounded ears.

After we finished loading all our travel necessities into the two carriages we were taking, we were ready to strap in what I’d thought would be horses. But to my surprise, the stable hand brought out a pair of giant lizards, which were called skitters. Domesticated mana beasts used for transportation, with spikes across their backs and powerful claws, these D-class monsters were much

more efficient, if more expensive, than horses for travelling mountain terrain.
When we were finally ready, I hopped up onto the second carriage, using a little mana to strengthen my legs. Lately I'd gotten the hang of using my mana to reinforce my body. I had yet to fully test what I was capable of, for fear of giving my parents heart attacks by showing off too much, but it was already becoming more natural for me to direct my mana from my core through my mana channels. I leaned up to look out the window as the skitters began pulling us along.
Let the journey begin!

By nightfall, the once-distant mountain range seemed to have doubled in size, and I wondered how big the Grand Mountains would be when we reached the foothills. The excitement of being out of the tiny outpost of Ashber, my hometown, had not worn off yet. The thing I detested most about this body was how much sleep I required. Despite my desire to see the country as we traveled, I'd slept most of the way, and I still felt heavy-eyed though I'd only been awake for a few hours.
We eventually stopped to make camp near a small cluster of boulders. It was an ideal spot to shelter, with the rocks blocking nearly all the wind and plenty of fallen branches to use for the campfire. The adults set up a couple of tents around the fire, and my father and mother had begun conversing with the Twin Horns about old times when Helen sat down next to me.
She said nonchalantly, "I heard your pops say you're some kind of genius mage. Is it true you've already awakened?"
Not knowing how to respond, I just replied with the truth. "Yes."
She began questioning me, asking things like how I'd felt when I awakened and what color my mana core currently was. By this time, a couple of curious ears had perked up.
Adam asked, "Hey, Reynolds, do you mind if I test little Art?"
If anyone had asked me, I might've said something along the lines of,

‘Maybe mock-fighting with someone my age isn’t the best idea, since a *normal* three-year-old’s great accomplishments at this point would be going up and down stairs with alternating feet, walking in a circle, and perhaps, if he was really coordinated, balancing on one foot for several seconds,’ but apparently that sort of thing never occurred to anyone here.

Both my father and mother seemed a bit hesitant at first, but they trusted their old comrade. Finally my father replied, “All right, but be careful. I haven’t had the chance to teach him how to properly fight yet. We’ve just been doing light strength and mana exercises so far.”

Adam got up from his makeshift log seat and looked around until he found a short stick he felt satisfied with.

“Come here, kid,” he said with a chuckle. “Let’s see what you’re made of.”

6

UP THE MOUNTAIN

I DIDN'T KNOW whether he'd heard I was some sort of genius and assumed I had an inflated ego, and wanted to beat some sense into me, or whether he was genuinely trying to gauge my strength. But judging by the smug grin on his face as he looked down at me—even if it was only natural for him to look down on me, given his height compared to mine, it still irked me—I was starting to suspect it was the former.

Retrieving the wooden sword I had been given by my parents, I walked to the edge of the camp, where Adam was waiting near a small clearing.

"You do know how to reinforce your weapon, right, genius?" he asked, emphasizing the last word.

By this time, my father seemed to have already sensed that Adam was trying to put on a show of dominance over his little boy, but he just watched, knowing he wouldn't hurt me too badly.

Many thanks, dear father.

My mother looked a bit more anxious. She kept glancing back and forth from me to Adam to my father, keeping a firm hold on Father's sleeve.

At least Mother was there to heal me if I got hurt. That was a small consolation.

I focused my gaze on Adam, who was about fifteen feet away from me. Images from my past life—dueling other kings for the sake of my country and those I loved—popped into my head. My eyes narrowed, restricting my

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vision to only the man in front of me. He was the opponent now.

I willed mana into my legs and dashed forward, both hands gripping the wooden sword as I lifted it to my right.

His expression still twisted into a smug smile, Adam prepared to block my horizontal swing, but I feinted. Using the special footwork I had developed for dueling in my old world, in an instant I had blinked a foot diagonally to his right.

Curse this body! I hadn't reached the spot I'd been aiming for—because of the height and weight difference of this smaller body compared to my old one, I hadn't executed the technique perfectly. Still, unfortunately for Adam, he had already positioned his stick to block my swing from the other direction, so his right side was unprotected.

His smug look vanished and his eyes opened wide as he realized what was about to happen.

Swinging at his open ribcage, I waited to until the last moment reinforce my wooden sword with mana to conserve my own mana, because I knew I was at a disadvantage against a veteran like him.

Adam's look of surprise lasted but a split second before he pivoted on his right foot with almost inhuman speed. I squatted in time to dodge his upward swing, and switched my stance from a thrust to a spinning swipe, using all my momentum to land a blow on his left ankle.

Adam's leg gave out at that moment, throwing him off balance—or so I thought. He actually did a full split before hoisting himself up on his hands to execute a low roundhouse kick.

I knew this body wouldn't be able to take a hit like that, so I jumped up to dodge his legs. Then, in my peripheral vision, I saw the flash of brown from his wooden stick. With no time to bring my blade up to block the swing, I thrust my sword pommel first into into the arc of Adam's wooden stick.

The physics lessons I'd studied in my old world suddenly came to mind. Newton's Third Law of Motion: 'For every action, there is an equal and

opposite reaction.'

The opposite reaction was painful indeed. While I did block the blow successfully, my small body was no match for its force, and I was launched into the air before skipping across the ground like a flat rock on a lake.

Thankfully, I had reinforced my whole body before the blow landed. Otherwise I could have been seriously hurt. Groaning, I sat up and rubbed my throbbing head. Looking up, I saw seven stupefied faces staring at me.

My mother recovered first, shaking her head. She rushed toward me and immediately mumbled a healing spell. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Durden thumping Adam's head with enough force to make him stumble forward. I couldn't say I was unhappy at the sight.

"Art, honey, are you okay? How do you feel?"

"I'm fine, Mom, don't worry."

Adam's voice cut in. "'Haven't taught him how to fight,' my ass! How the hell did you train this little monster?" he groaned, one hand gingerly prodding at the lump Durden had given him.

"I didn't teach him that," my father finally managed to say. He shook himself out of his stupor and came over to ask if I was okay. I just nodded. Then he picked me up and carried me back to where I had been sitting before. He lowered me back down gently, and squatted in front of me so he was at my eye level.

"Art, where did you learn to fight like that?"

Saying, "Hey dad, I was the King Duelist representative of my country, in a world where diplomatic and international issues are settled by battles. I just happened to be reincarnated as your son. Surprise," seemed unlikely to get a hearty reaction from him, so I decided to feign ignorance. I put on an innocent face and said, "By reading books and watching you, Dad."

"Sorry for roughing you up there, little buddy," Adam muttered. "I didn't expect I would need to use that much strength to get you off me."

Adam's apology gave me a slightly better impression of him. Perhaps he

wasn't a total ass.

A hushed voice came from my left. "Your fighting style is… unique. How did you do that step after the feint?"

Two complete sentences! That was by far the longest string of words Jasmine had said this entire trip. I felt almost honored.

"Thank you," I responded, and organized my thoughts before trying to explain, step by step, what I had done. "It's a simple technique. Since I was feinting to Mr. Krensh's right side, I placed my right foot forward as the last step before the feint. Then I instantly focused my mana into the right foot, pushing myself back. At the same time I brought my left leg behind the right, aimed at an angle toward where I wanted to go. I focused mana into my *left* foot this time, but with more power than I used on the right so that I didn't propel myself backward instead of the direction I actually wanted to go."

That was a mouthful.

I watched as Adam, Helen, and my father headed toward the clearing to test what I had just explained. I turned to face Jasmine, but saw only her back as she rushed toward the clearing as well.

Mother sat down next to me, patting my head with a gentle smile on her face that seemed to say, 'you did well.' Angela scooped me up, burying my face —or, rather, my whole head—in her bosom, cheerfully exclaiming, "Cute *and* talented, aren't you? Why couldn't you have been born earlier so this sister could snatch you up herself!"

Blushing, I willed myself away from her voluminous bosom. I couldn't help but feel awkward at the sensation of being crushed into her breasts while my mother and the rest looked on. This was, I suppose, another one of those things a normal three year old wouldn't have to worry about.

My guardian angel, Durden, was much calmer about things and just gave me a thumbs-up. I was beginning to like him.

The other four adults spent most of the night trying to master the feint-step, while I slept in the tent with Mother.

Days passed before we finally managed to make it to the foot of the Grand Mountains—which certainly lived up to their name.

Along the way, only Helen had managed to lay down her pride and ask me for clarification on the feint-step. I went over it slowly, explaining how to time the interval between the last right foot movement and the positioning of the left foot, and how to properly balance the output of mana into both feet to ensure you go in the direction you want. The whole time, I could almost see the ears of the other three growing larger as they tried to drink in the information I gave her, nodding as they took mental notes.

The first of the four to succeed was Jasmine. She seemed like the brusque, genius type, so I wasn't surprised.

She'd pulled me aside one day while I was taking my reading and writing lessons on the back of the carriage with Mother. Flushed with restrained excitement, she asked me to watch.

We had to make a brief stop so the carriages wouldn't leave us behind. After she successfully demonstrated the feint-step, I applauded, saying, "Amazing! You learned it so quickly!"

It was rather basic compared to some of the techniques I had developed, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

She responded curtly, saying, "It was nothing," but the upward curve of her lips and the slight proud twitch of her nose showed otherwise.

She was delighted.

By the time we had arrived at the foot of the Grand Mountains, the other three had also managed to learn the technique, each of them changing it slightly to fit their own fighting style.

The next step of the journey was the ascent up the mountains. Luckily, there was a path, wide enough for two carriages, that circled around the mountain, eventually leading to the teleportation gate at the top.

Durden held the reins of the carriage in front, with Father beside him to keep

him company. Their carriage held most of our luggage. Helen was currently seated on the top of the second carriage, the one I was riding in, scouting for anything out of the ordinary. Angela sat inside the second carriage with my mother and me, and Adam walked behind us, keeping guard. While Jasmine steered the carriage, she kept turning her head back and staring at me as if trying to drill holes through me with her eyes. I wondered if she expected me to show her some more techniques. But every time I met her gaze, she quickly turned her head back to the front, reminding me of an abashed five-year-old.

Speaking of age, I had turned four during the first leg of our journey to the foot of the Grand Mountains. I didn't know when Mother had prepared the cake, or where she had stored it—or whether it was even edible—but I didn't complain. I put on a big smile and thanked her and everyone else. The other adults all gave me a hug or a pat on the back, but then Jasmine surprised me by handing me a short knife, declaring simply, "Present."

From anyone else it would've been curt, but from Jasmine it was almost extravagant.

Fortunately, our journey up the mountain was uneventful. I spent a lot of my time reading my book on mana manipulation, trying to learn more about the differences between mana and ki. They seemed pretty similar, except that an augmenter's mana usage could occasionally take on the property of elements. Reading on, I noticed that, for beginners who were able to dabble in this, these elemental attributes were not as distinct as what one might see when conjurers cast spells, but only loosely resembled the quality of each individual element.

For example, an augmenter who had an innate compatibility with fire would have mana that showed an explosive quality when used. Water would naturally have a smooth, flexible aspect; earth would be firm and rigid; and, finally, wind would have the quality of a sharp blade.

It seemed strange to me. In my old world, these aspects of ki had nothing to

do with elements, but rather depended on how this inner energy was utilized. Shaping the ki into points and edges would give it the so-called “wind element;” storing it up into a single point and bursting it at the last moment would give it the “fire element,” and so on. Practitioners had their own preferences and were naturally better at practicing one style than another, but it wasn’t uncommon. Only the most basic use of ki involved reinforcing the body and weapons.

I would have to test this with mana the first chance I got. I had all the time in the world, free of any responsibilities, but being stuck in a four-year-old body with constant supervision by suspicious adults limited my ability to practice.

I was still reading when, suddenly, Helen’s alarmed voice rang in my ears.

“*Bandits!* Prepare to engage!” she shouted as a rumble of footsteps came from our right rear.

Angela began intoning, “Submit, O wind, and follow my will. I command and gather you around in protection. Wind Barrier!” I felt a gust of wind forming a tornado around Mother, Angela, and me inside the carriage. Then the gust formed into a sphere, enclosing us.

With her wand outstretched, Angela concentrated on keeping the barrier active. Arrows constantly bombarded it, only to be redirected as soon as they struck.

My mother pulled me in close, using her body to shield me from whatever might get through. Thankfully, her efforts weren’t necessary, as the barrier held strong.

In a matter of seconds, the tarp covering the carriage roof was torn to shreds, and I had a better view of the situation at hand.

We were completely surrounded.

7

HOW I WISHED

FROM WHAT I COULD SEE, there were at least thirty bandits. Our situation was unfavorable at best, as our paths—both to move forward and to retreat—were blocked by bandits wielding swords, spears, and other close-ranged weapons. Archers were positioned atop a cliff on the mountainside to our right, their bows aimed down at us, while only the steep edge of the mountain, with the looming fog below, beckoned to our left.

Jasmine, Durden, and my father showed no visible injuries, but Helen's complexion was unhealthily pale—evidently a result of the arrow jutting from her right calf. The walls of our carriage had given way to the force of Angela's spell, but the wind sphere still protected us.

A scarred, bald man with the body of a bear approached, settling the giant battle axe he carried against his shoulder. "Look what we have here. Pretty good catch, boys. Leave only the girls and the kid alive. Try not to scar them too much. Damaged goods sell for less," he snorted with a leer that revealed his nearly toothless mouth.

'*Damaged goods*'…

I felt my body temperature rising, and I tensed with a smoldering anger I hadn't felt toward anyone in a long time.

Being sheltered in the bubble of my home had almost made me forget, but any world will have its own share of trash like him.

Nearly forgetting the fact that I was now in a four-year-old's body, I was

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ready to rush this brute when my father yelled, “There are only four mages, and none of them seem to be conjurers! The rest are normal warriors!”

I hadn’t yet learned how to distinguish a mage from a normal human, but I trusted my father’s assessment—it was easy enough to infer what sort of mage a person was by their physical appearance and weapons.

I was impressed by how quickly my father reverted to his former adventuring days as the leader of the Twin Horns. His expression held the wisdom that could only come from experience. He donned his gauntlets, shouting, “Safeguard formation!”

Adam quickly arrived at the back of the carriage, facing the road behind us with his spear raised. Jasmine and Helen moved to our left with their weapons unsheathed, facing ahead, while Angela maintained her position, preparing another spell as she kept her wind barrier active. My father and Durden faced the mountainside, positioning themselves to protect us from the archers overhead.

“Gather and guard my allies, O benevolent Earth; do not let them be harmed,” Durden chanted, casting a spell, and the ground rumbled and transmuted into a massive earthen wall curving up in front of him.

Seizing that moment of distraction, my father burst forward toward the enemy archers, raising his gauntlets to guard against the flurry of arrows.

At almost the same moment, Angela finished her second spell and unleashed a torrent of wind blades, aiming them at the path behind and in front of the carriages. That was apparently the cue; Adam and Jasmine shadowed behind the wind spell to arrive in front of our distraught enemies, who were covering their vitals against the flurry of blades. Helen held her position, her arrow nocked and bow drawn, imbuing the tip with mana that shone with a faint blue light.

It didn’t take a genius to realize that this was the ideal arrangement for protecting people or valuable goods. With two layers of protection from the conjurers and an archer-mage ready to shoot down anyone who managed to

get past Adam, Jasmine, and Father, it was a standard yet well-thought-out formation.

"Warrior coming your way, Helen!" Adam shouted as he dodged the swing of a mace, delivering a precise swipe to the jugular of an unfortunate bandit. The man's eyes widened and he dropped his weapon, desperately trying to seal the fatal wound with his trembling hands as blood spurted from the gaps between his fingers.

Mother was holding me firmly to her body, trying to shield my eyes from the scenes of gore around us. But she wasn't looking down at me, so she didn't realize that I had a clear view of everything her arm didn't cover.

Meanwhile, a scruffy middle-aged man wielding a machete lunged toward us, hoping to disrupt Angela's wind-blade spell. Although the spell wasn't particularly powerful, it provided a painful distraction that kept us on equal footing, despite the fact that we were outnumbered.

I tried to free myself to block the man before he got in range to attack Angela, but before I could pull myself away from my mother, it was already over.

The fierce sound of the shot came only after the arrow had done its job. Helen had fired with enough force to pierce through the armored chest of the machete-wielding bandit, lift him up and back a half-dozen yards, and nail him into the ground.

I took a brief moment to make a mental note: Wise men ought not to piss off Helen.

Helen's eyes narrowed as she nocked and drew another arrow. Looking carefully, I could make out the mana gathering in her right eye as she shut her left. Soon, a second reinforced arrow streaked past with a sharp *hiss*, ignoring all air resistance as it closed in on another enemy fighter.

This man vaguely resembled a smaller Durden, but more muscular and more angular of face. With his brows furrowed in concentration, he had somehow brought his giant sword—which was easily as tall as he was—around to

reach the arrow in time to block it, creating a sound like a bullet hitting metal. The enemy fighter slid back, unharmed, and anchored his greatsword into the ground to balance himself. However, before he even had the chance to smirk in contentment, a second arrow pierced through his forehead. It was a grim sight, seeing the light drain from his eyes.

Jasmine was engaged in an intense duel against an augmenter, whose weapon was a long chain whip. Jasmine seemed to be at a disadvantage; the range of her two daggers was lacking, and she was doing all she could to dodge the erratic movements of the whip.

The enemy had realized how much she was struggling, and he licked his lips as he jeered, "I'll make sure to treat you real well before we sell you off as a slave, little missy. Don't worry—by the time I'm done training you, you'll be begging to stay with me."

The very thought made me shudder, but at this point all I could do was clench my fists in frustration. Against a fighter, I had a chance, but against an adult augmenter? I didn't have confidence in my chances of winning. It pained me to stay protected while everyone else risked their lives. I tried to think of ways to help, but none came to mind. I could only grit my teeth and endure.

Surveying the battle, I saw that the earth wall was holding strong, none of the arrows able to penetrate it. I watched Durden's left hand, which was directed toward the earth wall as he maintained a constant flow of mana to keep it from collapsing. He formed a narrow slit in the middle of the wall, allowing us to see my father chasing after the fleeing archers as they scattered about.

"Take heed, Mother Earth, and answer my call. Pierce my enemies. Let none of them live. Rupture Spike."

In moments, a dozen spikes burst forth from the ground beneath the bandit archers. A few managed to dodge, but many of the bandits were impaled, their screams lasting only moments before they died.

Casting the spell had visibly drained Durden; his jaw clenched as beads of sweat ran down his pale face. It was at this moment that I noticed my mother

had taken out a wand. Her trembling fingers fumbled with it, but then she shook her head and stuffed it back into her robe. In place of the wand, she held onto me, even tighter than before.

No one from our side was injured other than Helen, who had managed to tie a strip of cloth around her calf to minimize the bleeding from her wound. Fortunately, the arrow hadn't lodged too deeply, thanks to Helen's mana reinforcement; the bleeding was quickly under control. But throughout all of this, my mother had a constant look of anxiety, her face pale with worry. I couldn't help but notice that she kept reaching for the wand in her robe, only to draw her hand back at the last minute each time. Her eyes darted left and right, constantly looking out for anything that might harm us.

Her behavior confused me a bit, but I dismissed it, assuming that since she hadn't been an adventurer for as long as my father had, she was simply not used to situations like this.

The battle was coming to its peak. The bandit group had not anticipated that every member of our group would be a capable mage. Because of that error in calculation, all the melee fighters were dead. The only ones left alive were the mages and a couple of scattered archers on the run.

Jasmine was still having trouble with the chain-wielding slaver, but the arrogance was wiped from his expression by this time, and his body was dripping blood from various nicks and cuts.

Adam was engaged with an augmenter who held a sword in each hand. Adam's flexible maneuvers and the sudden attacks of his fighting style reminded me of a snake. He clearly had the potential to be one of the rare elemental augmenters with a water-attribute style.

Reinforcing the shaft of his spear for flexibility, Adam attacked with a storm of quick thrusts and fluid swipes. The battle seemed to be going in his favor; his opponent's wounds were bleeding profusely, and he desperately tried to parry the onslaught of Adam's blows.

A thundering crash shifted my attention away from their battle. My father

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was struggling to pick himself up from where his opponent had knocked him against the debris of what was left of the earth wall. Blood dribbled from the side of his mouth.

"Dad!" I shouted, and heard my mother cry in the same moment, "Honey!"

I rushed out of the protective curtain of wind to kneel in front of Father, my mother following immediately behind. The remaining bandits were struggling with the other Twin Horns members, so we were as safe as possible given the circumstances. I could see the panic written on her face as she nervously contemplated what to do. I didn't know why she wasn't healing him—maybe she was too startled to think of it. But just when I was about to suggest it, my father cut me off.

"Alice," he said with a ragged cough, "listen to me. Don't worry about me. If you use a healing spell right now, they'll realize what you are and try that much harder to capture you. They'll be willing to sacrifice a lot more if they know," he stressed, his voice a low whisper.

After a brief, trembling hesitation, my mother took out her wand and began chanting. Perhaps her stammering words were from distress at seeing her husband injured, or perhaps his warning had frightened her, but she seemed almost afraid of using her magic.

Father turned to me, after realizing he could not persuade his wife.

"Art, listen carefully. After the healing spell activates, they're going to do everything they can to capture your mother. Once I'm healed enough, I'm going to engage the leader and try to buy more time. I think I can beat him, but not if I have to worry about protecting the two of you. Take your mother back down the road and don't stop. Adam will open up a path for you."

"No, dad! I'm staying with you. I can fight! You saw me! I can help!" Any consideration for being mature eluded me. In this moment, I was acting exactly like the four-year-old I appeared to be, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to leave behind the family I had grown to love and the friends I had bonded with.

"*Listen to me, Arthur Leywin!*" Father roared in agony. This was the first time I had heard him use this voice—the kind of voice one would use only for desperate measures. "I know you can fight! That's why I'm entrusting your mother to you. Protect her, and protect the baby inside her. I'll catch up to you after this is over."

His words shook my mind like thunder.

Protect her, and protect the baby inside her…

Suddenly, everything clicked: why she was acting so fearful; why she was clutching me and making sure nothing even got close to us; why Durden and Angela were *both* guarding us with defensive spells, instead of just one of them.

My mother was pregnant.

"I was planning to tell you when we arrived in Xyrus, but…" My father didn't finish his sentence, just looked at me sheepishly, still pale from the blow he had received from the bald axe-wielding boss.

"I'll protect Mom. I promise."

"Atta boy. That's my son."

Just then, my mother finished her chant, and both she and my father glowed in a bright golden-white light.

"Son of a—One of them's a healer! Don't let her get away!" the leader roared.

I quickly grabbed my mother's arm with both hands and tugged at her to move, reinforcing myself with mana as we went.

A dozen yards down the road, we reached the area where Adam and the dual-wielder were battling. "Art, hurry, I got him!" Adam barked, keeping his opponent at bay. The dual-wielder was obviously frustrated by his inability to get past Adam to reach me or Mother.

As we hurried down the slope, I heard a faint *whizz* sound to our left. Acting on instinct, I jumped up, bringing my wooden sword up and reinforcing my whole body and the sword to withstand the blow of the incoming arrow.

A splintering crack resonated as the arrow met the wooden sword. Fortunately, the arrow wasn't reinforced with any mana, so even though the force of the impact pushed me back, I was able to regain my balance in midair by using the force of the shot, rotating my body and redirecting the arrow away. I landed on my feet—a bit less impressively than I'd wanted to—and threw away what was left of my wooden sword.

"What the—" I heard the assailant say, followed by a grunt as he was promptly impaled by one of Helen's arrows.

"*Go!*" she exclaimed, nocking in another arrow and firing it at the leader of the bandits to assist my father.

As I turned to grasp my mother's hand, I heard the bandit leader bark, "Damien! Forget the plan—don't let them live!"

Who is he giving commands to? Adam and Jasmine were each fighting a mage, my father and Helen were working together to battle the third—suddenly I remembered. *Weren't there four?*

"…respond to my call and wash all to oblivion!" a faint voice chanted.

On the mountainside, one of the scattered 'archers' was standing, his hands together, aimed at me and mother. We had been tricked. The fourth mage had camouflaged himself during the chaos and retreated to a safer distance.

Shit!

There wasn't much time to react as a huge sphere of pressurized water, at least three yards in diameter, shot toward us, increasing in size as it neared.

My mind raced, trying to come up with options.

To my immediate right was my mother, and to my left, not far off, were Adam and his opponent; behind me, of course, was the edge of the mountain. Even if I could dodge this, Mother wouldn't be able to—she'd be forced off the edge of the mountain.

What should I do?

"Damn it!" I let out a roar unfit for a four-year-old.

Gathering all the mana remaining in my small body, I tackled my mother,

propelling both of us out of the way. But I quickly realized my forty-pound body couldn't carry enough momentum to push us both of out of range of the water cannon.

I had no choice. But if I was going down, I was going to make sure to take that bastard down with me!

I channeled mana into my arms and pushed my mother further down, out of range. In that moment, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. My mother's eyes slowly widened in panic and disbelief. She might be badly bruised from the fall, but such minor injuries were the least of my problems at that moment. If I didn't want us to get hit with another spell, I had to get rid of this conjurer.

Unsheathing the knife Jasmine had given me from my waist, I imbued it with mana. What I was about to try was something I had only done with ki in my old world—never with mana.

After willing mana into the knife, I threw it like a boomerang, aiming it at the conjurer, who was still concentrating on the water cannon. The knife curved around the edge of the giant cannonball of water moments before I heard the firm *thud* of the blade meeting its target.

The mage let out a shrill howl of pain, followed by a string of curses that proved he wasn't dead.

Losing concentration, the mage let the water cannon falter, but unfortunately, the surge of water was still strong enough to push me off the cliff.

Thankfully, I had a backup plan. I had created a thin string of mana to attach the knife—currently lodged somewhere in the conjurer's body—to my hand.

I tugged back on the strand of mana just as the water rammed against my body like a brick wall, knocking every ounce of air out of my lungs and most likely breaking my ribs. Like a fish caught on the line, the mage screamed over the gushing tide of water as he was helplessly dragged down with me by the force of his own spell.

Even as my vision darkened, I could see the battle coming to an end. Father

and Helen had just managed to kill the leader. With Angela's help, Jasmine was able to bring the whip user down to his knees. I also spotted Durden—he was desperately conjuring a spell to save me, but I knew it was too late; the spell had knocked me too far away.

Still, I was comforted by the fact that everyone would be safe. The only thing I would regret, I thought, was being unable to see my baby sibling.

With that, I felt the cold grip of sleep steal me away.

Damn… I always wanted to be an older brother.

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8

QUESTIONS

The blurred sight of a familiar setting made me blink a few times to confirm that I wasn't dreaming.

Looking down at my long fingers and calloused palms, it seemed I was back in my old body.

Getting up from the couch I was sitting on, I stared blankly at the portrait of myself—one I'd always hated—peering down at me arrogantly from the wall.

Confused as to what was going on, I rushed out of my room inside the castle.

A young maid, who had been waiting for me just outside, greeted me respectfully as soon as I opened the door.

"Good morning, King Grey."

I didn't even bother glancing in her direction. She followed a few paces behind me as I walked through the immense, candle-lit hall.

Reaching the courtyard where all the trainees were lined up, swords held in front of them, I turned my attention to the instructors, who were shouting about proper stance and breathing. When one of the instructors saw me, he immediately stood at attention and gave a crisp military salute, and the other instructors and trainees followed suit.

I simply motioned for them to continue, and kept walking. Passing by the marble fountain, I finally reached the private study and pushed open the large double doors to stand in front of an aged man with a head of thick white hair that matched his long beard. He glanced up, his emerald eyes glimmering

with cunning, wisdom, and knowledge—Marlorn, the head of the council.
I held the title of "king," but I couldn't consider myself anything more than a glorified soldier. The ones who actually governed the country, managing the politics and economy, were the members of the council.
So what was the significance of my position as king?
As king, I was something like a one-man army. Due to the decreasing birthrates and increasing scarcity of natural resources, the councils of each country had assembled. After countless months of discussion and arguments, they finally came to the conclusion that, if mankind continued to wage wars, we would eventually wipe ourselves out.
Eliminating war would lead to two major outcomes: fewer deaths, leading to population growth; and a decrease in the destruction of resources and damage to arable land. The solution they enacted was to replace wars with a different form of combat.
This new form of 'warfare' became known as the Paragon Duels. Whenever a dispute arose at a level that threatened to impact a country, a Paragon Duel would be declared, with each country sending the representative they deemed the strongest. In most countries, that representative was named king and given the appropriate honors for the duration of his reign, basking in the praise of the public while the council members quietly enacted policy. Despite the seemingly deceptive nature of this, no one could doubt its effectiveness—humans wanted the simplicity of a black-or-white, win-or-lose situation, and the duels gave them just that.
Looking up with the insincere, unctuous smile that seemed to be an inborn trait of politicians, Marlorn exclaimed, "King Grey! What brings you to my humble dwelling?"
"I'm retiring."
Without even giving him the chance to react, I unclipped my badge—that piece of metal so sought after by every practitioner—and slammed it down on his giant oakwood desk, then walked out the door.

All these years, what have I been living for? I was an orphan, brought up in a camp designed to raise duelers. Everyone I had ever cared about had been stolen from me by violence. At twenty-eight years of age, I'd never dated, never loved. Until now, I'd devoted almost my whole life to being the strongest duelist, representing my country.

And for what?

Admiration? Money? Glory?

I'd had all that, but never in a million years would I choose it over what I'd had in the town of Ashber.

I missed Alice. I missed Reynolds. I missed Durden and Jasmine and Helen. I missed Angela. I even missed Adam.

Mother… Father…

As I stormed back toward my room, frustrated by these memories of what I could only see as a dream, the halls began tilting. Losing my balance, I fell to the ground as a muffled ringing sounded in my ears. The ringing became louder, piercing, and pulsed painfully in my head until my vision darkened.

The sound of someone coughing made my eyes snap open, and the pain I felt told me the coughing had been my own.

I closed my eyes and opened them again to find myself lying on my back, towering trees and dangling vines filling my vision. However, the excruciating pain that welcomed me told me I wasn't dreaming.

Where was I? How was I alive?

I tried to get up, but my body wouldn't listen. The only thing I was able to manage was turning my head, and even that involved a series of throbbing pains in my neck.

Looking to my right, I spotted my knapsack. I slowly turned my head to the left, gritting my teeth through the pain.

My eyes widened at the sight and I immediately had to fight the urge to vomit. To my left lay what remained of the conjurer I had dragged down with me. A pool of blood surrounded the corpse, which probably had more broken

bones than ones still intact. I could see the white shards of his ribs jutting out of the sunken cavity of the chest, and a pile of his entrails beside him. The mage's limbs were sprawled out at unnatural angles, his skull shattered in the back, brain matter oozing out along with blood.

His face was frozen into an expression of surprise and disbelief, only hollowed cavities remaining where his eyes used to be. A trail of dried blood ran down his face. I couldn't turn my head away fast enough. Even in my past life, I had never come across such a badly mangled corpse. The nauseating stench and insects feasting on the gore were too much to take.

My already-weakened body was assaulted with both the gruesome sight and repugnant smell, and I vomited what was left in my stomach until I was left gagging and dry-heaving. With parts of my face and neck covered in my own vomit, I finally managed to turn my head away from the sight of the mage's grotesque remains.

How was I still alive?

I couldn't help wondering what had happened while I was unconscious. The mage had been alive up until the landing… so what had happened to me? I should look very similar to his corpse right about now, maybe even worse. But not only was I alive, I didn't seem to have even so much as a broken bone.

I pondered over the possible answers until I was interrupted by a strong grumble from my stomach.

I fought through my body's protests at my attempts at movement. The only parts of my body I could control were my right arm and my head and neck. I willed mana into my right arm; using my fingers to claw my way, I dragged my body across the ground until I could reach my knapsack. It couldn't have been more than a yard away, but it felt like an hour before I finally managed to cover the distance. Pulling the bag closer to me, I rummaged through it with my one good hand until I found what I was looking for: the dried berries and nuts my mother had insisted on packing.

I succeeded in pouring myself a mouthful of the snack. In my reclining position, some of it strayed past my tongue, sending me into a choking fit, and the coughing triggered another round of agony in my body. Fumbling for the water skin inside my knapsack, I slowly poured a bit of the water into my mouth, then managed another handful of food. Tears rolled down the sides of my face and into my ears as I continued to chew on the dried rations. Finally I passed out again, using my knapsack as a makeshift blanket.

My eyes fluttered open as I stirred awake at the brisk bite of cold. I looked around as best as my stiff neck would allow and realized, by the position of the first rays of light peeking through the mountains, that it was dawn.

Using my mana, I managed to slowly get up. I carefully inspected my entire body, making sure everything was in place before allowing myself to relax.

First things first.

I made my way to the mage's corpse, trying to avoid looking at the heinous injuries that had caused his demise. Spotting what I was looking for, I quickly jerked the knife out of his thigh. I wasn't sure how long I would be here, so having a weapon was critical.

'Oh, you're awake.'

I instantly dropped into a fighting stance, gritting through the pain from the sudden movement. With my knife in hand, I turned to face the carcass.

I swear to God if this corpse is the one that's talking…

A melodic chuckle made me look around for the source of the voice.

'Do not worry. You won't have to worry about that corpse reanimating.'

The voice, which seemed to come from nowhere, had a dignified yet gentle quality, evincing a sense of royalty. It was powerful and resonant, yet had a silky, soothing sound that made me want to trust it.

Still on guard, I managed to mutter a less-than-elegant response. "Who are you? Are you the one who saved me?"

'Yes, to your second question. As for the first, you will find out soon enough, when you arrive at my dwelling.'

This voice seemed awfully sure that I would try to find it.
As if reading my thoughts, it continued, *'I am the only one who will be able to get you home from this place, so I advise you to make haste.'*
That jerked some sense into me. *That's right! I have to get back home! Mother! Father! The Twin Horns! My baby sibling! Are they all right? Did they reach Xyrus safely?*
If the voice could really take me back home, I had no choice but to find it.
Clearing my throat, I spoke again. "Dear, uh… Mr. Voice, may I humbly ask for the directions to your location?"
The Voice let out another soft chuckle before replying. *'Don't you think it's a little rude to call a lady "Mister"? But yes, I'll show you the way.'*
So it was a lady.
Suddenly, my vision shifted into a bird's-eye view. As if zooming out, a location came into sight—roughly a day's trip to the east—and lit up, before my vision shifted back to normal.
'I recommend departing immediately. It will be a lot safer traveling during the day than when it gets dark,' the Voice chided gently.
"Yes, ma'am." I picked up my knapsack and set off at a slow trot toward my destination.
My movements became less painful with each step and, by mid-morning, I was left with only a few aches here and there. Whatever that lady had done involved some powerful magic. I'd never heard of anyone casting a spell over such a distance. Or had she cast the spell right before I landed, and then left? But how could she have known we were falling, and why had she saved only me? The harder I tried to solve the mystery, the more questions I seemed to end up with.
After several more hours, my throat burning from thirst, I heard a faint gurgling sound. I headed toward it and spotted a narrow stream.
"Yes!" I exclaimed.
I was absolutely filthy. My face and neck still stank of vomit, and my clothes

were torn and caked with grime. I sprinted to the stream and cannonballed into it, then vigorously scrubbed my face and body clean. After taking off my clothes and giving them a rough wash, I laid them on a nearby rock to dry. I had finished this refreshing bath and was walking toward my still-damp clothes when a soft chuckle sounded in my head.

'How pleasantly carefree.'

Reflexively, both my hands shot down to cover my privates as I hunched my back, trying to make my body as small as possible.

'Don't worry, there wasn't much to see.' I could practically *feel* the Voice wink at me, and I shuddered.

How rude! My pride…

I wanted to argue that my body wasn't developed yet, but I chose to ignore the Voice and put on my clothes.

'Aww. Don't pout. I apologize.' The Voice stifled a laugh.

Calm your mind, Arthur. A king must be calm…

The Voice remained silent after I put on my clothes, so I rummaged through my bag and dug out the last of my rations. Water wasn't going to be a problem for a while since I had just refilled my water skin, but I would need food soon; hopefully the Voice would provide me with something.

I looked around, beginning to wonder where I was. Since I had fallen off the mountain toward the east, I knew I must be near the elves' domain. I didn't think I was in the Forest of Elshire, because I wasn't surrounded by fog. Could I be in the Beast Glades? No. There weren't any mana beasts. I'd spotted a few rabbits and birds, but I had yet to see anything else. But there was a strange abundance of mana in this place. It must have been due to this richness of mana that I had been able to recover from my initial injuries so quickly, though that still didn't explain how I had survived in the first place.

Maybe the Voice will explain it to me. I should hurry.

It was a peaceful, uneventful trip. There was no road, but there were only minimal obstacles in the terrain. The nearer I drew to my destination—the

source of the Voice—the richer and denser the mana became. Ignoring the temptation to stop and absorb the surrounding mana, I pressed on. Training wasn't important right now. I needed to get home.

Everyone probably assumed I was dead, so I couldn't help but worry about Mother and Father—not so much for their physical well-being, but their mental health. I was concerned they would blame themselves for my 'death.' The only thought that comforted me was the fact that my mother was pregnant. I knew that, at least for the sake of my unborn brother or sister, they'd stay strong.

I finally reached the area the Voice had guided me to, but I was unable to see anything other than a cluster of rocks shaded by a small stand of trees.

'I'm glad you made it here safely,' the Voice echoed confidently, as if it had always known I would.

"Nice to meet you, uhh… ma'am? Miss Rocks?"

'I'm not a rock—nor a cluster of them. The two large rocks leaning against each other on the other side form a crevice. That's where you'll find me,' the Voice chuckled in my head.

Looking around, I managed to spot the small gap between the two larger rocks, just large enough for an adult to squeeze through. The slight breeze coming from the crevice told me I had found what I was looking for. If the Voice hadn't directed me to this exact location, I would never even have noticed the small fissure.

'Enter through the crevice, child, but strengthen yourself with mana before you do.'

Soon I can get back to Mother and Father!

Without a second's hesitation, I easily slipped in through the gap, while willing mana to strengthen my body.

I had expected to step onto a platform, but instead, I immediately plummeted down into the dark hole. The Voice had failed to mention that I'd be taking a vertical fall.

I guess that's why she told me to use mana. The thought flashed through my head as I descended, screaming at the top of my four-year-old lungs.

The fall seemed to last several minutes. Finally I began to see a faint light below me.

I landed harshly on my feet, the impact traveled up my legs and back, jarring my entire body before I collapsed on my bottom. Groaning, I slowly levered myself up.

"So, child. We finally meet."

I felt the blood drain from my face as my mouth gaped open and eyes bulged. I was suddenly lightheaded, and my legs gave out from under me once more. I fell back onto my already-aching butt, staring at the one who had been helping me this whole time.

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9

ONES HELD DEAR

"W-WHAT *ARE* YOU?" I managed to stammer.

Despite having lived two lives, my brain refused to believe what I was looking at. A monster—for a lack of a better word—easily more than three stories high, was seated cross-legged on a crudely carved throne of jagged stone, one arm lazily supporting its—*her*, I reminded myself—head. The petrifying red eyes that gazed down at me, though menacing, carried an oddly tranquil quality. Two massive horns protruded from the sides of her head, arching down and around her skull and curving up to a point near the front, almost like a crown. Two fangs peeked out from her lips, and her body was adorned in sleek black armor. Though it had neither decorations nor embellishments, it still glowed like a priceless treasure.

I was once a king. Still, this being sitting before me now made me embarrassed to have ever had the nerve to call myself one. No, the one sitting on that giant throne was a being that would make even the most faithless of heretics bow down in reverence.

Yet here she was, in all her glory, her head resting on one arm, nonchalantly scratching her nose with the other hand.

And what I had failed to notice until now, because of the dim lighting in the cave and the blackness of her body, was that this being had a gaping hole in the side of her chest, from which blood oozed in a slow but steady flow.

"We finally meet," she repeated with a lazy half-smile that revealed a row of

pointed teeth.
I tried to get up, but only made it halfway. I ended up back on my butt, my face still slack with shock at what my eyes were seeing.
"Bugs will fly into your mouth if you keep it open that wide."
Well, at least she has a sense of humor, I thought.
"As for what I am, I won't discuss that. You can draw your own conclusions based on what you see," the horned humanoid monster said. Her eyes seemed to gaze straight through me.
I was speechless, but the creature didn't seem to notice.
"It will take some time for me to open a dimensional gate to transport you to your house," she sighed. "Until then, just be patient and wait here. There are special roots that grow here. You will be able to live off those until I finish."
That's right. In my shock at the creature's appearance I had completely forgotten about my family. I managed to regain a bit of my composure and stood, walking a little closer to the being.
Giving a courteous bow, I replied, "Thank you for everything you've done for me, and for what you intend to do. If there is any way I can repay you, I will do for you whatever is in my power."
"Such good manners for a child. Do not worry; I am expecting neither a favor nor your gratitude. I'm doing this simply for my own amusement. Come! Sit here closer to me and keep me company. I haven't talked to anyone in a while," the being said with a laugh, and patted an area of her throne for me to sit on.
I climbed up onto the platform rather awkwardly, forgetting I could use mana to just jump up, and propped myself on the throne next to the being.
"Excuse me if I am being rude, but you don't really look like a lady. How exactly shall I address you?" I said, making eye contact.
"You're right. I don't exactly look like a lady, now do I? I wonder why I said that. My name is Sylvia," she replied, letting out a soft chuckle.
This giant demon god-like monster looked like anything but a "Sylvia" to me,

but I chose to keep that to myself.
"Elder Sylvia, do you mind if I ask a few questions?"
"Go ahead, young one, although I may not be able to answer everything."
I immediately began rattling off questions, overcome by the curious wonderment that her presence cast over me. "Where is this place? Why were you here all alone? Where did you come from? Why do you have that huge wound? Why did you save me?"
She patiently waited for me to finish before replying.
"You must have had a lot on your mind. The first question is easy to answer. This place is in a narrow zone between the Beast Glades and the Forest of Elshire," she explained easily. "No one knows of it because I've been warding off anyone who came close, although there are few instances of that in any case. You, young child, are the first to enter into this domain."
"Please, call me Art. My name is Arthur Leywin, but everyone calls me Art! You can too," I blurted, before clapping my hands over my mouth, confused as to why I had spoken like an excited child.
"Very well, child, I will call you Art." Her red eyes glazed over, gazing into the distance while answering my next questions.
"Continuing on to your second question, I am here alone simply because I have no one left to be with. While I do not think telling you everything would be wise, I will tell you that I have many enemies who desperately wish for something I have. My last battle with my enemies left this wound. As for where I come from, it is very far away."
Sylvia paused for a moment before continuing. This time her eyes looked straight at me, as if she was studying me.
"Why I saved you… even I do not fully know the answer to that question. Perhaps I have simply been alone for too long and wished to have someone to talk to. I first noticed you when your party was engaged in battle with the bandits. When you fell off the cliff to save your mother, I felt compelled to rescue you. It seemed a waste for such a good child to die. You are very

brave. It is rare for even an adult to show such presence of mind under pressure."

I shook my head. "I was scared, too, but I didn't have much of an option. I just wanted to save my mother and my baby sibling inside her." I didn't know if it was from the gentle way she talked or because of how big and powerful she seemed, but when I was in front of her, I seemed to turn into a child. No, I *was* a child in her presence.

"Your mother was pregnant? I see… You must miss them dearly. But rest assured, your family and party escaped unscathed. As for where they have gone, my sight cannot reach far enough to tell anymore."

A wave of relief washed over me, and it took all I had to keep my tears from falling. *They're safe.* This new life was exposing me to emotions I had buried deep down in my previous world.

"Thank God. Th-they're alive… They're okay." I let out a sniffle.

Sylvia's giant hand reached down and she softly patted my head with a finger.

I spent the rest of the day conversing with Sylvia. Toward afternoon, she directed me to some edible roots, which looked and tasted very similar to potatoes but were black in color. We talked about all sorts of things to pass the time as she prepared to open a portal. At one point, she asked me how I was able to use mana so well at my age.

"I was under the impression that, so far, the earliest a human mage had ever awakened was at the age of ten—and even then, because the child couldn't grasp how to use it, there was very little he could do with it. Yet not only have you already formed your mana core, but, by the way you use your mana, you seem to be more skilled than many full-fledged mages."

I just shrugged, feeling a twinge of pride at her compliment. "My parents said I was a genius or something. I can read really well, and I understand what the books are saying."

The twinkle in the being's piercing eyes seemed to show that whatever I was,

she knew that the word 'genius' wasn't sufficient to describe it—but Sylvia remained silent.

The days trickled by as Sylvia continued preparing the portal. One day, in a regretful tone, she explained, "The spell will take some time to be completely safe. I would not like for you to land in a destination you are not familiar with. If there is even one inconsistency, it could lead to you arriving hundreds of feet off the ground. Please be patient. You will be able to see your loved ones soon."

I nodded. As long as I knew they were alive, I was fine with waiting. It beat trying to climb back up the edge of the mountain.

While I trained my mana core and chatted with Sylvia, I noticed a few things. Sylvia exemplified the cliché, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Contrary to her intimidating appearance, she was kind, gentle, patient, and warm. She reminded me of my mother, in the way that they both managed to be tender while scolding me when I did something wrong. One afternoon I mentioned that the mage I had fought, along with the other bandits, deserved worse deaths than they had suffered. She suddenly flicked my forehead.

Even though she was gentle, a flick of a finger from someone over three stories tall was nothing to make light of. I was sent tumbling to the ground. When I recovered, I asked angrily, "What was that for?"

She picked me up and set me on her armored knee and, her tone soft but pained, she said, "Art. Perhaps you are not wrong in that those bandits deserved death. I myself could have saved the mage you fell with, but I chose not to, for the same reasons. However, do not let your heart be clouded with continuous thoughts of hatred and the like. Continue proudly with your life and gain the strength to protect your loved ones from harm. Along the way, you will face dangerous situations, maybe even worse than the ones you have survived already—but don't let the grief and rage corrode your heart. Move on, and learn from those experiences—better yourself—so they won't happen again."

I blinked, a bit stunned to be lectured on morality by someone who looked like the epitome of evil herself. But her words struck a chord within me, and I just responded with a blank nod.

As time passed, I noticed that her wound seemed to be getting bigger. At first I found it somewhat odd that she could still be alive with a gaping hole in the side of her chest, but I soon grew accustomed to the sight of it. After several days, however, it was clear that the wound was bleeding more consistently now. Sylvia tried at first to hide it with her hand, but it was growing more and more obvious.

Noticing the direction of my concerned gaze, Sylvia gave me a weak smile and said, "Do not worry, little one. This wound festers from time to time."

One day, while I was meditating and using strict movement techniques to better control my mana, Sylvia suddenly interrupted. "Art. Try absorbing mana during your movements. Ideally, while you are fighting you should be able to absorb at least a fraction of the mana you would during meditation. You'll be using mana faster than you can absorb it, but you should be able to prolong the usage of your mana."

I remembered having had this exact idea. I had never gotten to test my hypothesis, since I wasn't able to move as freely as I could now. I was used to thinking of the absorption of mana and the manipulation of mana as two separate things, and I hadn't stopped to think about the possibilities in this new world.

I nodded. "I'll try."

"Humans have a very linear mindset regarding mana and find it hard to deviate from anything that already works. Practice hard now, though, because you can only acquire this skill while both your body and mana core are immature. Even mana beasts learn this technique, but humans awaken much too late and, in most cases, their bodies have nearly matured by that time. But considering how young you are, there shouldn't be a problem so long as you practice," Sylvia continued, giving a proud puff of her nose.

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I had to admit that, as with most theories I tested, it was extremely difficult at first. It reminded me of the exercises the headmaster at the orphanage had showed us when I was younger, the ones where you tried to make each of your arms do something different, but it was much harder. But mastering this would essentially mean I would be able to fight proficiently while still maintaining a constant inward flow of mana.

Sylvia's only advice was to tell me that an exceptional mage must be able to split his conscious mind into multiple segments in order to process information at the most efficient speed. I'd never had a teacher tell me to split my mind, but I tried doing as she said. I've never tripped over my own body so many times, not even if you combined all my experiences from both my lives. This, at least, seemed to get a few hearty chuckles of amusement out of Sylvia.

The months passed. I kept Sylvia company, telling stories of my family and the town I was born in, and continued to improve in the mana technique thanks to Sylvia's patience and my diligence.

If there was a name for this skill, Sylvia refused to reveal it, so I named it myself: mana rotation.

It would be an understatement to say I had grown close to Sylvia. She had treated me like her own blood grandson and, in response, I'd gotten attached to this demon lord grandmother. And, because of our growing relationship, I wasn't able to simply ignore what was happening. It was frustratingly clear that, as the portal that would take me home became more distinct, her wound was growing worse.

One especially bad night, after she had vomited a pool of blood, I couldn't hold back my concern. "Sylvia, please tell me what's happening to your wound. Why is it getting worse? It wasn't like this before. Your saying it 'festers from time to time' was clearly a lie. This isn't going to go away on its own—it's actually getting worse!"

I paused for a second, struck with the realization. *Why didn't I notice this before?*

She had been getting worse while creating the portal.

In order to send me home—

She was sacrificing her life so I could return to my family.

Sylvia let out a deep breath, knowing that I had realized what was going on. Managing a sheepish smile, she whispered, "Art. Yes, I am dying. But I will be angry if you blame yourself, thinking that you have caused this. I have been dying for quite a while now. You are doing me a favor by allowing me to leave this forsaken cave a bit faster."

As soon as she finished speaking, a bright golden glow began radiating from her body. Shielding my eyes to keep from going blind, I tried to focus on the shape forming where Sylvia had been sitting. In place of the ten-yard titan-like figure was a dragon, even larger. From her snout to the end of her tail, she was a covered in a pearl-white coat of shimmering scales. Beneath her iridescent lavender eyes were glowing golden runes that marked her neck and ran down to spread around her body and tail like sacred engravings. They looked like an elegant, almost celestial tribal pattern, branching out harmoniously and with purpose, like carefully placed vines. The dragon's wings were pure white adorned with white-bladed feathers so fine and sharp as to put even a sword forged by a master smith to shame.

The golden light enveloping the dragon dimmed until I no longer needed to shield my eyes. I looked at the celestial creature sitting where Sylvia had been.

"There now… Do I look a bit more like a Sylvia in this form?" Sylvia gave a toothy smirk.

"S-Sylvia? You're a dragon?" I said.

"Now that I am in this form, we do not have much time. Yes, I am what you humans refer to as a dragon. This wound that is killing me was inflicted during a narrow escape from men who sought to capture me. I sensed one of

them drawing dangerously close a few days ago, so I feel that my time of hiding is drawing to an end. This form will alert them of my location, so I have time to explain only what is necessary. First, take this. I will need you to take care of it from now on."

One of her bladed wings unfolded to reveal a translucent, rainbow-colored stone the size of two fists. With its myriad of colors and shades, the stone gave off an aura that made me hesitate to take it. I felt almost as if I wasn't worthy of holding it.

Without waiting for me to respond, she continued: "Everything will reveal itself when the time comes. Just hold onto it—and do not let anyone else know that you have it. Most will not know what it is, but everyone will be attracted by the aura it emits."

While she spoke, she had plucked a feather from her wings with her claw; now she handed it to me. "Wrap the stone in this to conceal it."

After I followed her instructions, the once-divine, radiant stone now appeared to be merely a smooth white rock—pretty, but ordinary.

While I studied the feather-encased stone, I was suddenly pushed back as Sylvia's snout gently brushed against my chest, where my mana core was.

Taken aback, I looked up to see Sylvia's purple eyes, and the gold markings around them, blazing even brighter than they had when she first transformed. As the markings grew dimmer and then disappeared, Sylvia pierced my core with her tongue, giving off wisps of a golden smoke that crackled with sparks of purple.

A sharp yelp escaped my mouth as I blinked, confused and surprised. I continued to just stare at her as she drew her head back, leaving a trail of blood from a hole in my threadbare shirt. My sternum had bled, but when I ran my hand over the area, there was no wound.

Sylvia's expression was visibly pained and weak; it was apparent even for a mighty dragon. Perhaps most notably, her once-shimmering purple irises were now just a dim yellow, and the beautiful runes that had flowed across

her face and body were now gone.

I opened my mouth to ask what she had done, but a giant explosion interrupted me.

I whipped my head up to see that the ceiling of the cave had been blown off. The figure that now appeared through the opening reminded me of Sylvia's previous form.

It was clad in sleek black armor and a blood-red cape that matched its eyes. The figure's skin was pale grey, like the clouded sky in the background. Its horns were different, though—this entity had two horns which curled down and under its ears, following the line of its chin.

Sylvia immediately covered me with one of her wings to protect me from the falling debris—and probably to keep me hidden from our visitor.

"Lady Sylvia! I advise you to stop your stubbornness and hand it over. You've already caused us quite enough trouble by hiding yourself. If you submit, the lord may even heal your wound." The entity sounded impatient.

As soon as he finished speaking, the world around me seemed to pause. Except for Sylvia and myself, the colors of the world had changed, as if I was looking at a photographic negative. Most surprising of all, everything was as still, as if suspended in amber—the entity, the clouds behind him, even the debris falling from the ceiling.

Ignoring the enemy, Sylvia casually peeked at me underneath her wing. "I'll open the portal now," she whispered, her eyes solemn. "I didn't have time to make it go directly to your home, but it should take you to a place with humans nearby. Do not let him see you and do not look back."

But I had heard the intruder's promise, and I ignored Sylvia's instructions. "Sylvia! Is what he said true? If you turn yourself over, will you be able to live?"

"Do not trust his honey-coated words. It will be worse for you if you are found right now. As for me, I would rather die than go back to where he is," Sylvia said, impatience and anger mingling in her voice.

"No! I won't let you die here. If you refuse to go with him, then please, just come with me," I begged.
"I cannot go with you. You will forever be in danger if any one of them finds out you have had contact with me. I must stay here."
Sylvia gently wiped my cheeks with a claw, her draconic eyes lined with tears.
"You once asked me why I chose to save you. The truth is, it was to satisfy my own greed. I wanted to keep you as my own child, even for just a little while. I intentionally prolonged the transportation spell, because I wished to have more time with you, and now there is not enough time to finish it. I'm sorry, little Art, for my selfishness—but I have one last request to make. Can you be my grandson? Will you call me 'grandmother' just this once?"
"I don't care about all that. I'll say it as much as you want if you come with me. Grandma! Grandma! You can't! Not like this!" I was stuttering with fear and frustration. "Please, I'm begging you, just come with me. I-I don't know what you did but everything is frozen right now; we can escape! Please, Grandmother, don't go. Not like this!" I held tight to Sylvia's claw, desperately trying to pull her away with me.
In that moment, Sylvia's face blossomed into a smile so beautiful she looked almost human.
I barely caught the words she spoke as she pushed me into the portal.
"Thank you, my child."

10

ROAD AHEAD

The trip through the dimensional rift evoked a very peculiar sensation. My surroundings whizzed by in an indistinct blur of colors while the space below slipped from underneath me. I stared blankly off into the distance with no more tears left to cry.

I landed with a jolt on hard ground, though my fall was cushioned by a pile of leaves and vines. It didn't matter, though. Even if I had landed on jagged rocks, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

I remained in the same seated position I had maintained during the trip, not even bothering to look around me and take in my surroundings.

She was gone.

I would never have the chance to see her again.

Those two thoughts triggered another wave of emotion, and I heaved with sobs.

I recalled the months we had spent together—how caring she was, how she had treated me like her own blood. I didn't care that she had delayed sending me home in order to keep me with her. In the short time I had been with Sylvia, she'd taught me so much and given me insights I had lacked in this world.

The anguish was overwhelming, and I succumbed to the urge to sleep—my mind's way of coping with it, I supposed. I curled up into a ball where I had landed, but then a searing pain jolted me back up.

The burning sensation spread from my mana core throughout my body, and then a voice echoed in my head.

'Ahem. Testing, testing… Ah, good! Hello, Art. This is Sylvia.'

My heart fluttered in instant response to the voice. "Sylvia! I'm here! Can you hear—"

'If you're listening to this right now, it means I have shown you what I actually am.'

It was some kind of recording. She must have implanted it in me when she gouged that small hole into my mana core.

'You're nowhere near ready right now to know the whole truth. Knowing you, if you knew who my enemy was, you would have brashly tried to fight him. Little Art, you are barely four years old. Yet, looking at your mana core and seeing that it is already dark red in color, I have realized that you have a rare talent. I will leave you with this: I have imbued your mana core with my unique will. This is something incomparable to the will of any normal beast. Your future progress as a mage depends on how well you will be able to use it…'

Was that why the purple in her eyes and her golden patterns had disappeared?

'When your mana core passes the white stage, you will hear from me again. At that time, I will explain everything. What you do from there will be your choice.'

There was a stage past white?

'Lastly, Art… I know you may be grieving, but remember: You have your family to look out for, and the stone I entrusted you with. My wish is for you to embrace the joys and innocence of childhood, train hard, and make your parents and me proud. Do not go chasing after shadows in a fit of rage. Killing the ones responsible for my death will neither bring me back to life nor ease your pain. There is a reason for everything and I do not regret what has happened. With this, I bid you farewell for now. Remember, protect your family and the stone, study what I have left you, and enjoy this life, King

Grey.'

That name and title were from my previous world.

She had known the entire time…

Did she discover something in my mana core? Was she able to look into my memories?

I had so many questions, but the only one who could answer them was gone.

I refused to move for a long time, staying in my cozy fetal position, deep in thought.

Sylvia was right. She had known what my life back in my old world was like.

I could not let myself make the same mistake—living solely for the sake of pursuing strength. I wanted to be strong, but I also wanted to live my life without regret. I wanted to live a life that Sylvia would be proud of. Even if I reached whatever stage was after white, I did not think it would please her to know I had lived a life of only training. No, I needed to hurry and reach my family.

But before I could do that, I needed to know—where the hell was I?

Looking around, trees surrounded me, towering high over my head. A dense fog loomed thickly a few inches off the ground, filling the air with nearly palpable moisture.

Trees and an unnaturally thick fog…

I sank back on my butt, crestfallen. This could only mean one thing.

I was in the Forest of Elshire.

A disheartened sigh escaped from my mouth as I picked myself up.

It seemed I wouldn't be reuniting with my family any time soon. It had been over four months since I had gone over the cliff. My family had probably gone back to Ashber—or perhaps they had decided to stay in Xyrus.

I didn't have any sort of provisions other than the clothes on my back, and the strange stone wrapped in Sylvia's feather. This cursed fog limited my vision to a few yards in any direction. Reinforcing my eyes with mana helped quite a bit, but it didn't solve the even bigger problem, which was how to get

out of this place.
I reinforced my body and enabled mana rotation, which had become second nature to me by now. Right now, I could only absorb roughly twenty percent of what I could while just meditating, but I couldn't complain.
The only downside to mana rotation was that it wasn't a replacement for strengthening the mana core. In order to purify my mana core and get to the next stage, I would need to focus solely on gathering mana, from both my body and the surrounding atmosphere, and use that to get rid of the impurities little by little. After getting my mana core to the dark red level, I did notice that the amount of mana I could store increased significantly. Although the core does not grow in size, I assumed a higher purity allowed more mana to be stored.
I climbed up the nearest tree, and once I got high enough, I focused mana into only my eyes, enhancing my vision even further.
I wasn't looking for a way out, but rather for any signs of people. Sylvia had said that I would be teleported close to humans, so I was hoping there might be adventurers traveling nearby who could direct me out, or even escort me.
After about ten minutes of searching, jumping from tree to tree, I found what I was looking for.
I hopped a few more trees, feeling quite proud of my primate nimbleness, and stopped at a branch closer to what I'd found. A group of humans were gathered near a carriage. I'd wanted to jump down and greet them in hopes that they'd take me back to my home, but some inexplicable urge told me not to. Studying their expressions and the way they moved told me something was off.
I hid myself completely behind the trunk and listened intently.
"No! Help! Someone please help! Mommy! Daddy! *Nooo!*"
"Someone shut her up. She's going to attract attention."
There was the sound of a thud, then another voice spoke.
"Put her in the back of the carriage, and make it quick. Still a few days until

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we get to the safety of the mountain range. We can't slow down now. We have to keep moving."

"Hey, boss, how much y'reckon she'll sell for? Elf girls go for a lot, don't they? And as young as she is, she's probably a virgin at that. I bet she'll fetch a lot, huh?"

Slave traders.

I carefully took a peek, spotting the small carriage, just big enough to carry five or six adults if they were crammed in tightly. Just then, a middle-aged man came into view, hauling a little girl to the back of the carriage. She looked to be around six or seven, with the silvery hue in her hair and the pointed ears that elves were famous for.

What do I do?

How were they even able to kidnap an elf in the first place? The Elshire Forest's magical fog was supposed to disorient the senses of even the most capable mage.

After a few more seconds of observing, I found my answer.

Attached to leashes were mana beasts, creatures that looked like a mix between a deer and a dog. They had large, branching antlers, looking like a complicated antenna. These creatures had been mentioned in the encyclopedia I had always carried with me. The forest hounds were native to the Forest of Elshire, and could navigate even better than the elves themselves. How these brutes had acquired forest hounds, I had no idea, but I needed to think of a plan.

Option one: Steal one of the forest hounds and have it lead me out of the forest.

Option two: Kidnap the kidnapped elf girl and have her lead me out of the forest.

Option three: Kill all the slave traders and set the elf girl free, then take the forest hounds and have them lead me out of the forest.

I pondered for a couple of minutes, struggling with a dilemma. The first

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option would be easiest, but it didn't sit right with me to just leave the elf girl.

But who knows, I thought, rationalizing. *Maybe she'll get bought by a kind old man who will free her and take her back to her home.*

Fat chance.

The second option had an obvious flaw; once I saved the elf, she might refuse to lead me out of the forest and insist on going back home. The slave traders probably wouldn't take it too kindly, either.

Option three had the best outcome, but was by far the most difficult and dangerous, considering that there were four of them and only one of me. Because of the fog, I couldn't sense if any of them were mages, but it was safe to assume that at least one of them would be. The fact that they had captured an elf in the forest meant they were either extremely lucky, or they were professionals.

I let out another deep breath. I seemed to be sighing a lot these days.

Option three it is.

Deciding to trail them and actually following through with it were two different matters. The forest hounds were already warily sniffing in my direction, sensing that someone was near. I had to follow them at quite a distance, constantly using mana to keep up with their carriage from far enough back that I could still track them, but they wouldn't notice me. But through constant mana usage, with the help of mana rotation, I managed to keep them in my sights.

Less than an hour before nightfall, they had stopped and set up camp, allowing me to quietly observe them until I had learned enough about them to confidently make a move. I waited until it was completely dark, then moved carefully to a branch directly above the carriage and prepared to put my plan into action. First I stirred up the forest hounds with a carefully thrown rock.

Despite their bumbling appearance, the slave traders were surprisingly vigilant; they never built a fire and kept two people on guard at all times.

When the forest hounds began squealing, one of the two guards—a lanky man, armed only with a long knife—went around to the other side of the carriage to quiet them. The guard who stayed behind was sitting on a fallen log, fiddling with something in his hands while the other two traders were sleeping inside the tent.

My first target would be the one who had gone to quiet the forest hounds. His lean muscles were visible, but he didn't seem too strong. I dropped down with a quiet thud behind him.

Startled by the soft sound, Lanky turned around, probably expecting a curious weasel or rat. His face twisted into a mixture of surprise and amusement when he saw me, a four-year-old child in ragged clothes.

But before he even had the chance to speak, I lunged upward toward his neck. I infused mana into the blade of my hand, turning it into a sharp edge. This was called "the swordless art" in my old world, but here it would be more accurate to call it a wind attribute technique.

He flinched back reflexively, his hands coming up toward his face to guard against my blow.

It was too late.

I took a quick swipe at his jugular, taking his larynx out along with his carotid artery. A stream of blood sprayed out of his neck as I landed behind him, supporting his lifeless body and gently placing him down to avoid making noise. As I had expected, the forest hounds Lanky had just calmed down were sent back into a frenzy at the stench of blood, and they resumed their howling and barking.

"Oy, Pinky! Can't even calm the hounds? What the…"

I had already retrieved Pinky's knife and was waiting for the second man at the back corner of the carriage.

While the second slave trader's attention was on Pinky's corpse—currently being eaten by the forest hounds—I jumped out from behind him and stabbed him in the neck.

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After some snarling, the hounds quieted down to devour the two corpses. I headed toward the tent to dispatch the remaining two in their sleep, but a shrill cry ruined my plans.

"*Help!* Mommy! Someone! Anyone! *Please!*"

Son of a… why now, of all times?

As if on cue, I heard the rustle of the tent as the two remaining slave traders came out. "Pinky! Deuce!" one of them barked, still half asleep. "The kid is awake! What the hell are you—"

I swallowed down the inappropriate urge to laugh at the slave traders' ridiculous names, and hid myself behind a tree next to the carriage. While I waited, I infused mana into Pinky's knife.

Sensing something was amiss, the two slavers carefully stepped around to the other side of the carriage. Their eyes bulged as they witnessed their two former companions being eaten by the forest hounds.

I was about to seize the opportunity to attack the nearest one when his gaze whipped back to me, and he instantly swung his short sword at my face.

Dodging the slash, I dropped low and dashed toward him, trying to get in range with my knife. I swung, reinforcing even more mana into the knife, and landed a clean blow, slicing the Achilles heel of his right leg.

He let out a pained howl and dove desperately out of my range before I could do any further damage, crying, "Danton, be careful! I think this brat is a mage."

I turned my attention to Danton, who pulled his sword from its sheath and lowered into a defensive stance.

"You see all sorts of crazy things these days, George. Looks like a huge sack of gold just showed itself in front of us! I bet he'll get us almost as much as the elf," he said, with a crazed chuckle.

These bastards didn't even care that I had just killed their party members.

Danton's body glowed faintly as he reinforced himself with mana. He advanced toward me, his lips curling into a confident grin on his square face.

With that crippled leg, George was out of the fight, but this augmenter was going to be trouble.

The augmenter, Danton, suddenly sprung at me, his right arm poised to throw a punch. I could only assume he chose not to use his sword so as not to damage his "goods." While I'd normally have been offended, in this case his overconfidence made it much easier for me.

I jumped back in time to avoid the blow, which was strong enough to leave a small dent in the ground. I threw my knife at him, using the same trick as I had with the conjurer I'd dragged over the cliff, but this mage was more careful. He disrupted the mana string with his sword and grabbed my knife with his free hand.

Shit.

I was in a bad position. Danton wasn't tall, but his reach was still a good bit longer than mine. He also had a sword, which he now deemed it necessary to use, and that further increased his range.

Wasting no time, Danton dashed toward me, throwing the knife that I had just launched at him. I easily dodged, but not in time to react to his next move as he swiped at my leg with his sheath. As I stumbled, trying to regain my balance, he grabbed hold of my ankle and flipped me upside down.

His confident face crumpled as I concentrated mana and punched the hand that gripped me. I used a fire attribute technique, releasing all the mana focused on my fist, and aimed for the weak joints of his wrist.

A loud crack, followed by howled profanities, proved that the attack was sufficient.

He could no longer grip my ankle with his broken wrist, so I fell, landing awkwardly on my back. Quickly jumping up to my feet, I picked up Pinky's knife and charged toward the wounded Danton. Still preoccupied by the pain in his wrist, he cursed, "You're dead now, you piece of shit! I don't care if I can't sell you anymore!"

His left wrist was useless, leaving a gap in his defense. I willed more mana

into my feet and came within range. I was about to land a solid hit to his side when I saw him furiously swinging his sword down.

He fell for it!

I quickly pivoted with my left foot in place, spinning to my right. Dodging the swing by a hair's breadth, I brought my knife within range of his right side, which was now open because of his last desperate swing.

He immediately tried to jump back, but I placed my right foot behind his leg, throwing him off balance. With one quick thrust I jabbed my knife up under his armpit, through the gap between his ribs, and into his chest.

I finished him off easily while his lung collapsed from the wound.

I was now left with the immobile George. The poor fighter couldn't really defend himself or run away with his useless leg. I couldn't use Danton's sword—it was too large and heavy for me—so I made use of Pinky's knife one last time and swiped George's jugular. He died with a look of disbelief, and I fed him to the hounds.

Judging by the eerie quiet, the elf girl seemed to know there was fighting going on. I climbed up onto the back of the carriage where she was locked and spotted her shivering in the corner, her once lavish clothing caked with dirt and grime. She studied me with an expression of surprise and doubt, her eyes seeming to say, "He can't have been the one who saved me, can he?"

She remained silent as I untied her, her swollen turquoise eyes never leaving my face.

Tired and feeling gross, I helped her up and said simply, "You should go back home now."

She probably hadn't known until now whether I was an enemy or friend, but when I said the word "home," a look of relief washed over her tense face and she broke down, hiccupping and sobbing.

"I was so scared! They were going to sell me. I thought I was never going to see my family again!"

I sat quietly next to her, offering silent comfort as she wept.

11

TO AND FRO

It felt like a good hour before the little elf girl was finally able to settle down. I didn't blame her; being forcibly kidnapped would be traumatic even for adults, and she seemed to be only a bit older than I was.

As I comforted her, I realized how bizarre this scene must be—a four-year-old boy tenderly patting the head of an elven girl in the back of a carriage as beasts devoured four bloody corpses just next to them.

"W-What happened to those bad guys?" she sniffled, her voice still raw.

I didn't know if telling such a young child about killing was appropriate, so I avoided it by telling her simply, "They had a… very unfortunate accident."

She studied the hesitant expression on my face with a raised brow, then looked back down and whispered, "Serves them right."

Perhaps it was merely my reaction to seeing an elf for the first time, or perhaps, even then, I felt some inborn connection that bonded me to the girl. Whatever it was, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her disheveled state couldn't mask the innate beauty that seemed to radiate from her.

She had long, gunmetal grey hair that I had mistaken for silver in the sunlight. A pair of gleaming teal eyes shaped like perfect almonds sparkled beneath long fluttering lashes, and her perky nose was so red from crying that it matched the color of her rosy lips. Each of her individual facial features seemed to be carefully molded gems, but the fair, creamy skin of her face was the canvas that brought her features into a surreal, almost phantasmal work of

art.

I helped her up to her feet before speaking again. "The people who tried to kidnap you aren't going to chase you anymore. Do you think you can make it back home by yourself?"

She drew back in fear as a panicked expression covered her face. Tears welled up in her eyes, and both her hands clenched tightly to my shirt like claws. Her answer would have been clear even to an infant.

"Look, I need to get home too. Aren't elves generally safe in this forest?" I sighed, trying to pry her fingers from my shirt.

She shook her head violently, like a dog drying itself, and said, "Beasts are only scared of grown-ups. My parents told me children get eaten by hounds or tree golems."

I would normally have been amazed and intrigued about something like a tree golem, but after witnessing a demon king metamorphize into a dragon, it was becoming difficult to find anything that could surprise me.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, trying to come up with a solution. "How long does it take to get from here to where you live?"

Still holding onto my shabby shirt, she looked down and admitted, "I don't know."

I fought the temptation to release another sigh, since the poor girl looked like she was about to cry already, and agreed to take her back home.

The kingdom of Elenoir was quite some distance to the north, so my only hope was that there would be a teleportation gate there that could get me back to somewhere—*anywhere*—in Sapin.

I instructed the elf girl to wait inside the carriage while I gathered some necessities; I didn't want her to see the mangled carcasses of the slave traders, the sight of which even I found hard to stomach. I finally found a backpack small enough for me to wear without it dragging on the ground. I carefully folded and stuffed a small tent into it, and added a leather water skin and some dried rations. I picked up Pinky's knife from where it had fallen

when I'd fought Danton and George, and strapped it to the front of my waist to balance the awkwardness of the heavy equipment on my back.

I thought briefly about taking the carriage back to the elven kingdom, but it was too dangerous—we would stick out like sore thumbs in the forest—so I freed the forest hounds. While they were domesticated enough to pull a carriage, they couldn't be ridden.

When everything was ready, I stuck my head back into the carriage. "Let's head out now," I said, trying to sound more enthusiastic for the girl's sake.

"Okay!" She hopped out of the carriage and I led her away, trying to steer her around the area where all the dead bodies lay.

I learned a lot about the elf girl along the way. Her name was Tessia Eralith and she had just turned five, so she was about a year older than I was—physiologically, that is. Most elves reached puberty around age seven, but even though she was much closer to physical adulthood than I was, I still had the advantage of an adult mind in my four-year-old body.

Tessia was also a reserved girl, almost to the point of being shy. She was very polite to me, especially considering that I was younger than her, and never complained, which made her a very agreeable traveling companion. If not for the fact that I was traveling away from my destination, I might have actually enjoyed having her with me.

When the sun began to set and the fog gathered thickly around us, we pitched the tent underneath the exposed roots of a particularly large tree for the night. Centuries of soil erosion had washed away the earth surrounding the massive trunk, leaving its spreading roots elevated like archways.

I hadn't been able to fit any of the supporting rods in the backpack, so I used the long rope I'd brought with me instead. I stretched it between two of the roots and hung the tent canvas over it, weighing down the canvas edges with moss-covered rocks. After I finished setting up the tent, we sat next to it, underneath a tree root, and I took out the dried rations.

I handed some to Tessia, and she gave a slight bow.

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"Thank you very much."

"You know, you don't have to be so polite to me. I'm younger than you, and I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you weren't so on edge," I replied around a mouthful of the dried rations.

"Okay, I'll try." She gave a shy smile.

I began wondering if she had been raised in a very strict household. Perhaps it was simply customary for elves to be so formal—maybe by telling her to be more comfortable with me, I was inadvertently inviting her to marry me. Giving her a shrug, I continued stuffing my face with food.

"Can you tell me about the human kingdom?" she suddenly asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"What did you want to know?"

"What is a human city like? How are humans? Is it true that all male humans are perverts and have more than one wife?"

I choked on the dried fruits I was chewing, spraying them out before they got caught in my windpipe.

"No. Although it isn't against the law, usually only the nobility and the royal families have multiple wives," I said after composing myself and wiping my mouth.

"I see now." Her eyes were still sparkling.

Do you really?

I went on, explaining a bit about the town of Ashber and my family to pass the time, then I asked her the same question. "What is it like living in Elenoir?"

She pondered a bit before finding the words to explain.

"I don't think it's too different from what you told me about where you grew up, except the children all have to go to school to learn about our history and how to read and write. When we awaken, we get mentors assigned to us and we become their disciple. From there, a lot of it is just training with your master."

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"I see." I pondered the differences between the education systems of the humans and elves. While the educational method of the elves was a lot more advanced and undiscriminating, it only worked because the elven kingdom was much smaller and tight-knit by comparison to the human kingdom, but it was clear to see how the early foundations were laid for cultural differences in the older generations.

I got up from the ground and held out my hand to help Tessia up. She hesitated, and I thought she turned a little red, but decided it was just an effect of the rapidly dwindling light.

"You sleep in the tent. I'll keep guard next to you, outside."

I could see her thinking; then she fixed her eyes on me, full of resolve.

"I don't mind sh-sharing the tent, if you're okay with it." She tried to sound nonchalant but her voice betrayed her.

I replied much more quickly than I had meant to. "No, don't worry about that. I'm not very sleepy right now anyway."

"All right."

Did her ears just droop a little?

I waited until I was sure she was inside the tent, then leaned against the massive tree trunk and began meditating.

I started inspecting my mana core. Sylvia had left me with something she called her "will" but how would it affect my mana core? Inspecting even closer, I noticed some faint markings in my mana core. Just then, I heard a noise.

"Arthur?" Tessia's head poked out of the tent.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked.

"W-well, you see… beasts will more likely appear if they notice you, because they will see that you are a child. So, for our safety, it would be better for you to come inside the tent." Tessia had covered her face with the tent's opening flap, peeking out with one eye.

"Pfft." I chuckled. Then something occurred to me. "Tessia, are you scared to

sleep by yourself in the tent?"

"A-absolutely not! I was just suggesting what the best choice would be for both of us to be safe," she insisted. She nearly tumbled out of the tent.

"If that's the case, then I'll hide up in the tree and stay on the lookout. You know… for *our safety*," I said with a wink.

"Um…" She hid herself back inside the tent for a moment before muttering softly, "…I'm scared to sleep by myself in the tent."

Smiling to myself, I opened the flap and crawled inside.

Caught by surprise, Tessia let out a small yelp, then immediately lay down with her back to me. Seeing how red her ears were, I thought about teasing the poor elf girl a little more. I easily could see myself enjoying it.

After a few silent moments, she peeked over her shoulder. "Can I hold onto your shirt?"

Then, seeing her trembling, I remembered that she was just a child. I couldn't imagine how hard it must have been for her—getting kidnapped, being separated from her family and carried off, not knowing if she would ever see them again.

Scooting closer to her, I gave her head another soft pat as she turned her body and clutched the edge of my tattered shirt. Her eyes closed in contentment and, after a few minutes, her breathing became more rhythmic. I began drifting off to sleep too, still sitting up.

My eyes fluttered open on their own and it took a few seconds to remember where I was. I looked down to see Tessia's head on my lap, her body curled up comfortably.

Gently shaking her awake, I whispered, "Tessia, we should head out now."

She slowly stirred awake, but when she realized the position we were in, her body shot up and she gave a surprised shriek. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to!"

"Don't worry about it," I replied with a wry smile. "Let's fold up the tent."

With slightly pink cheeks, she nodded in response and we began packing everything up to resume our journey.

The time passed by uneventfully until, out of nowhere, I was struck with deep aches in my abdomen. The first pains occurred on the third day of the trip. We were inside the tent, Tessia already fast asleep, when a sudden searing ache spread out from my sternum. It disappeared soon enough, but even that brief moment was painful enough to leave me in shivers. I worried that there was something seriously wrong, but my concerns seemed unfounded when the pain did not return.

The most exciting occurrence otherwise was when a couple of forest hounds tried to get close, but I chased them away with a throw of my mana-reinforced knife. Our pace wasn't impeded by any tree golems or stronger mana beasts looking for children to snack on.

I continued sleeping in the tent with Tessia at night, and she grew more comfortable around me—at least comfortable enough not to get embarrassed every time she woke up. Our conversations became more natural and had fewer awkward silences, and she began joking around with me, even teasing me about the way I talked. In her words, I was "trying too hard to sound like an adult."

"Can you tell how far we are from Elenoir now, Tessia?" I asked, one clear morning. It was the fifth day of our journey.

Her elongated ears twitched as she began surveying our surroundings. Then she darted to a particularly crooked tree and ran her fingers over the trunk. A few moments went by in silence before she returned to me, visibly excited.

"That tree is one I used to come visit with my grandfather sometimes! I remember carving my name into the trunk when he wasn't looking," she said, pointing to the tree. "We're not too far away. I think if we quicken our pace a little bit, we'll be able to make it by tonight."

"Sounds good," I answered, following behind her. As lovely as the journey had been, I needed to make plans to somehow get back to my family, and that wouldn't be possible until I got her home.

I had to admit, though, I'd probably miss her after our time together.

"Arthur? You said your family and the people close to you called you Art. I have gotten pretty close to you on our journey." We were on a moss-covered log bridge, crossing a stream, when she suddenly stopped. "So… can I call you Art, too?" Tessia turned around, revealing a wide smile.

"Hmm? Sure, I don't mind," I said, returning her smile.

"You 'don't mind'? You could sound a little more enthusiastic." She stuck her tongue out at me.

"I would be honored to have you call me Art, Your Highness." Despite my tattered clothes, I made a bow gracious enough for a noble.

"And you may also have the honor of calling me Tess," she giggled, curtsying back at me before turning around and hopping off the log.

We continued to make haste toward our destination, with only a few quick stops to rest and replenish our stomachs. Constant use of mana rotation had kept my body from being over-strained, but it was obvious that Tess was growing wearier.

After a quick rest on a soft patch of moss, we continued forward for the last stretch. Tess and I had gotten quite close on this journey; the once shy and reserved elf girl now often wore a bright smile, which was contagious despite our less than comfortable conditions.

She continued teasing me, too, saying that I should call her 'older sister,' since she was a full year older than I was. I returned the teasing and imitated her crying, rubbing my eyes and yelling, "Waaa, mommy, I'm scared!" She turned bright red and smacked my arm, then started to pout. Crossing her arms, her lower lip protruding, she stomped off before yelling, "Meanie!"

By dusk, the fog around us was getting thicker. My sense of direction was all but useless in this blasted forest—enough so that, if I were to get separated from Tess, I could easily wind up traveling in circles without even realizing it.

Then she turned to me, her face a mixture of happiness and trepidation, and said, "We're here."

Looking around, the only things visible to me were clusters of trees and fog. Confused, I was about to ask where "here" was, but I saw Tess place both palms on a tree. She began muttering a chant, and suddenly, the fog around us was sucked into the same tree. What came into vision was a giant wooden door, which seemed to be propped up by itself on the ground.

Tess grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door. When she opened it, I was reminded of the portal Sylvia had pushed me through. The experience didn't feel any better the second time, but I at least knew what to expect. As we softly landed on our feet at our destination, I began rummaging through my bag to make sure I still had the stone Sylvia had entrusted to me. Only after confirming that it was safe did I finally look up and take in the scene around us.

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12

MEETING

Pristine.

That was the word that popped into my head as I gawked at the elven city. It appeared we had directly teleported just beyond the gates. The buildings before me seemed to be built out of jade, each one so flawless and smooth that it seemed to be carved from a single, huge stone. Huge trees intertwined with the buildings, their massive trunks even larger than the jade-like buildings, filling the whole city with a distinctive and organic ambience. Looking up, I saw entire homes built on the unnaturally thick branches of the trees, smoke drifting out of their chimneys.

The ground was almost entirely covered by a lush field of soft moss, with only the narrow sidewalks and the main road paved with smooth stone. The dense array of branches fanning out from the trees covered most of the city in a canopy of shade, but there was a warm, luminescent glow throughout the city thanks to floating orbs of light situated on every corner and along every street.

I stood slack-jawed, still processing the world around me, until a shadow whizzed in front of me, jolting me awake.

Tess was still holding on to my hand when a group of what appeared to be guards arrived out of nowhere. Dressed in coordinated black suits with green trimmings and a golden shoulder guard on their left shoulder, these elven warriors emanated dignity. All five guards carried a rapier strapped to their

waist. I made a mental note: The guards radiated no detectable aura.

The bodies of both augmenters and conjurers emit a faint natural aura. The fact that I wasn't able to sense any mana leaking from the five people in front of me meant one of two things: Their mana cores were at a high enough level that I wasn't able to sense it, or they had enough control over their mana to not let any leak out. Either way, it meant that these guys were as impressive as their attire made them look.

The guards ignored my presence, but kneeled in unison in front of Tess. "We welcome back the royal princess."

Stunned, my gaze flicked back and forth between the guards and Tess. I remembered how I had jokingly called Tessia 'Your Highness' that morning.

Tessia was actually the princess of this kingdom?

When I tried to let go of Tessia's hand, she squeezed it tighter. In a voice so cold and reserved that it sounded like someone else's, she said, "You may rise."

They stood up, each with his right fist still crossing his chest, and the knight in front spoke. "Princess, we came as soon as we saw that the royal teleportation gate had been used. The king and queen are—"

Before he could finish speaking, I heard a cry. "My baby! Tessia, you're okay! Oh, my baby!"

Running toward us were a middle-aged man and woman. From the crown on the man's head and the tiara encircling the woman's forehead, I assumed that they were the king and queen.

The king's tall, muscular body was clad in a loose, decorated robe. His emerald eyes were slanted upward and his thin lips were tense. His expression, along with his short, military-style hair, gave him a dignified but somewhat reserved appearance.

The queen, however, was breathtaking. Although she was a bit past the bloom of her youth, her age couldn't mask the beauty that she was. Her round eyes shimmered a light blue hue, contrasting well with her lush pink lips. Her

silver hair fell in curls down her back, streaming out behind her as she ran toward us, and her well-proportioned figure was visible underneath her dress. Her cheeks were lined with tears, and her husband's tense expression gave the impression that he too was holding back tears.

I turned my gaze in time to see Tessia's face visibly soften as she started tearing up as well. I let go of her hand and gently pushed her toward her parents, feeling a little sentimental myself.

Tessia ran straight to her mother's arms. Both of her parents were sobbing at this point, on their knees, each burying their face in their daughter's shoulders.

The last to arrive was an old man, well past his prime. His facial features were all sharp, and his gaze looked like it could kill someone on contact. His hair was pure white and tied back from a cleanly-shaven face. He didn't say anything, but his eyes did soften a bit when he saw Tessia.

It took several minutes for Tessia and her parents to calm down. In the meantime, the guards were glaring at me with daggers in their eyes, and even the elderly man was eyeing me curiously.

The king finally stood up, carrying himself with an air of dignity despite the redness of his eyes. "As the King of Elenoir, I must apologize for my unsightly appearance and behavior. But, more importantly, as Tessia's father, I wish to thank you for escorting my daughter back home safely." His voice sounded a bit hoarse. "Please accompany us to our home so you may rest before you tell us what happened."

His tone was gentle, but it was clear that I didn't really have a choice, so I simply nodded in consent. I was about to follow behind them, but Tessia came over to me and grabbed my hand again. The people surrounding us looked on with expressions of shock, and I chuckled uncomfortably as I scratched the side of my head, unable to muster the appropriate words for the situation.

After an incredibly awkward ride, which seemed to take a lot longer than it

actually did, we arrived at the royal home. Rather than a castle, however, as I had expected, it appeared to be an enormous tree. This tree, its trunk broad enough that it would take at least a few hundred people to encircle it, had apparently gone through a petrification process of some sort, and now looked like white stone.

Stepping through the front doors of the tree, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the interior of the castle matched the outside in impressiveness. Two curved staircases formed a circle, with a gigantic chandelier floating in the middle of it. This chandelier seemed to be made of the same material as the orbs of light that were dotted around the city.

I had informed the king and queen that I didn't need to rest and would rather tell them our story as soon as we arrived, so that's what we did.

Not even pausing to wash up, the welcoming crew led us to the rectangular dining table downstairs. Tessia's father took a seat on the far end of the table and instructed me to sit directly opposite of him. Tessia's mother sat on her husband's left side, with Tessia seated right next to her. The old man—who was, it turned out, Tessia's grandfather—sat on the king's right, across from Tessia and her mother, leaving a pretty big distance between me and the royal family. The five guards stood behind the king, slightly off to one side.

The king rested his elbows on the table, fingers intertwined, before speaking. "Child. What did you say your name was?"

This discussion wasn't going to progress well if they were going to treat me like a child. I stood up.

"Forgive me for the late introduction, Your Highness. My name is Arthur Leywin, and I come from a remote town in the kingdom of Sapin. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, King, Queen, Elder, and gentlemen." I bowed slightly to each of them in turn before sitting back down.

Both the king and queen, as well as the guards in the back, were visibly surprised by my mature behavior, and even the grandpa had an amused smirk on his face. Tessia gave me a shy smile.

Regaining his composure, the king proceeded. "You seem much more mature than your age would indicate. Forgive me for assuming. I am Alduin Eralith; this is my wife, Merial Eralith, and my father, Virion Eralith. Now, please tell us what happened. We would like to hear your side of this."

Waving off the apology, I began telling the story. I made sure to be very vague as to how I had gotten into the Forest of Elshire in the first place; I simply said I had been separated from my family after running into bandits, only managing to survive by luck.

Inevitably, I had to tell them I was a mage. This was followed by another round of disbelieving looks from everyone, including Tessia. We had not faced any obstacles on our journey back, so I'd never really had the need to use mana, and I hadn't bothered explaining.

"How dare you lie in the presence of elven royalty?" a lean guard hissed. "Even as a child, you should know better!"

"Daun, that's enough," Tessia's father grunted.

The soldier persisted. "Your Majesty, I suggest we test the boy to see if he's telling the—"

A firm thud resounded through the chamber, startling the soldier and causing everyone to turn to Tessia's grandfather, who had his palm on the table. Elder Virion didn't say a word, but the soldier stiffened and relented. Virion signaled for me to continue with my story, gazing at me with a renewed, eerie interest.

I quickly moved on, telling how I had spotted the men and observed them carrying a tied-up child—Tessia—into the back of a carriage before taking off.

At this, the king leapt to his feet and slammed both hands down on the table, his eyes narrowing into a menacing glare.

"I should've known it was humans!"

I corrected his mildly racist comment, saying, "They were slave traders. They and bandits alike prey not just on elves, but on humans as well. I speak as a

victim myself."
The king clamped his mouth shut before sitting back down, letting out a soft cough.
"I didn't ask Tess… ah… the princess this, but I am curious as to how slave traders even got their hands on a princess of this kingdom," I said. I had almost called Tessia by her nickname, but I didn't think something as informal as 'Tess' would sit right with the people present.
At this, the king almost looked embarrassed. Finally he said, "My wife and I had a bit of a disagreement with Tessia, and she decided to rebel by running away. We had decided to let her cool off a bit before fetching her back—we know where she usually stays when she pouts—but unfortunately, she ran into these huma... slave traders first."
Ah… a runaway princess. I sneaked Tess a small grin. She responded by sticking out her tongue, face flushed.
I glossed over the details of my fight with the slave traders, saying only, "Luckily, I caught the slave traders by surprise. I managed to dispose of them, then untied the princess and escorted her here."
The king's father, seated across from Tessia, leaned back in his chair so only two of the legs were touching the ground before chiming in. "So… you, a four-year-old, managed to 'luckily' kill off four adults—including an augmenter, at that—and now you simply wave it off like it's no big deal."
"Yes. Two of them were asleep and the other two were simply not very alert, so disposing of them was not too challenging," I shot back.
The elder gave no response other than a lazy shrug of his shoulder.
After recounting the events, I cleared my throat before making the request I had come here for. "As I have mentioned, it has been almost four months since I have seen my parents. I do not plan to intrude on your hospitality for long, as I wish to rejoin them quickly. I was wondering if you might have a teleportation gate that could take me to the city of Xyrus, or anywhere in Sapin."

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"You're going to leave already, Art?" Tessia shot up from her seat, face stricken with panic.
Her mother and father exchanged baffled glances, each mouthing 'Art?"
The elder just gave a smug grin and chuckled, rocking on his chair.
"I don't think it would be appropriate for a human such as myself to stay in your kingdom for too long, Princess," I answered. "Besides, I wish to be sure that my family is safe, and to tell them I'm okay as well." I gave her a sheepish smile.
The king responded before Tessia could speak. "It has been almost a hundred years since the last human set foot into the kingdom of Elenoir—and you, Arthur, are the first human to ever visit our capital, the city of Zestier. However, your actions in saving our daughter and taking the trouble to accompany her all the way back to us do entitle you to a proper reward."
I took a quick peek at Tessia. Her head was down, her gunmetal grey hair covering her face.
"Unfortunately," the king continued, "the teleportation gate linked with the kingdom of Sapin opens only once every seven years, for the Summit Conference between the three races. The last Summit was two years ago. It will be five more years until the gate opens again."
I couldn't hold back my deep sigh of disappointment.
"However, we will be quite pleased to send a group of guards to escort you back home. You are correct that it may not be wise for you to stay in our kingdom for long. While some are tolerant, many hold animosity toward humans because of the atrocities committed by members of your race during the war long ago." His jaw tightened as he spoke.
I nodded in agreement. At least I'd be able to safely go back home.
"For now, please make yourself at home here. We will have your escort prepared by tomorrow morning. I do advise you not to wander around outside in the city, however, for the reasons mentioned earlier."
The king snapped his fingers, and an elderly elf woman in a tan maid's

uniform rushed over to lead me to my room.
The room I was led to was large, but furnished with elegant simplicity. The only furniture was a couch, tea table, bed, and dresser, but each piece was solid wood, and appeared to have been handmade by seasoned craftsmen. As soon as the maid left, I closed the door behind me, stripped, and went straight for the bathroom. The shower was a pleasant surprise—a simple waterfall that seemed to flow naturally from the ceiling and drain back out through the floor. The constant flow of water, which didn't seem to ever turn off, was a surprisingly pleasant temperature, just warm enough to relax my muscles.
After bathing, I changed into shorts and a silky robe that came down to my waist. I put the stone Sylvia had left me into the chest pocket of my robe and, once again, tried to study my mana core.
After thirty minutes of making only minimal progress, I heard a knock on my door.
"Coming!"
Opening the door, I was greeted by a pouting Tessia, who threw a light punch at my chest.
"You dummy! Why did you act so unfriendly with my family back there?" she harrumphed, slipping past me to sit on my bed.
"Well, first of all, you didn't mention that you happened to be the princess of this entire kingdom!" Shaking my head, I gripped Tessia's hand and pulled her out of my room. Kids or not, I didn't think her parents were going to like her being alone with a boy in his room.
"Come on, show me around the castle! I won't get the chance to visit this place again." I regretted the words as soon as I said them.
I heard a slight sniffle, then Tessia broke down in tears, trying to talk though her sobs. "Art! I don't want you to leave." It was hard to make out her words through the crying. "You're the first person I've ever gotten close to…"
She clutched at my arm; I gently patted her head while she rubbed her eyes with her free hand.

We continued walking in silence, except for Tess's soft sniffles, until we made it outside to the courtyard at the back of the castle. The floating orbs gave off a dim, luminescent glow, giving the well-kept garden a gentle atmosphere.

I couldn't help but imagine how differently this scene might have played out if we had been ten years older.

Before I even had the chance to finish my thought, a blatantly clear killing intent bombarded my senses. In almost the same instant, a faint glimmer revealed the position of a projectile aimed at Tessia. I pushed the still-crying princess out of the way and prepared to parry the projectile with a mana-infused hand.

A figure in black was behind me, his right arm in attack stance. Grabbing the projectile, I immediately spun to block the assassin with whatever had been thrown at me. To my surprise, I was face to face with Tessia's grandfather.

I jumped back out of range, then shouted angrily, "What the hell! Why are you trying to kill us?"

"Child," he chuckled, "it might hurt a little, but I doubt that toy you're holding could kill anyone."

I looked down at my hand to see a pencil-sized projectile, both ends blunted and coated in a layer of something similar to rubber.

I'd been tricked!

"Nice reaction, nice reaction! I didn't think you'd catch my little present and use it to block my next attack—truly marvelous. However, your usage of mana was mediocre at best."

He proceeded to throw me a wooden sword fit for my size, and took out a wooden sword of his own, just a bit bigger.

"Here I come!" Without giving me time to assume a defensive stance or even the option to accept his impromptu training, he dashed toward me.

This crazy old bat!

I lowered my stance and, instead of being defensive, I launched myself at him

as well, accelerating to throw off the timing of his swing. Aiming for his fingers where they gripped the sword, I swung upward, reinforcing my entire body.

My sword should have made contact with his hand, but I was met with only air as he disappeared from my sight.

Whipping my head back, I spotted him a few yards away.

"You're a scary little boy, aren't you? Looks like I'll have to be a bit more serious," the old man said with a smirk.

He was even faster this time. Though my previous life had been one of only training and battles, I was barely able to keep him in my sight—and even so, being able to see him and being able to respond to his attacks were two different things.

I felt like a sandbag, and I could only curse at my own body. I was able to block one of his moves for every three blows he landed.

Technique be damned, this old man was dominating me through sheer speed. I was able to somewhat keep up only by using sword techniques and footwork to minimize my movement—and because of the fact that I was such a small target.

After a few minutes of being treated like a wooden training post, I began noticing patterns in Virion's attacks.

When he flashed behind me, preparing to do a horizontal sweep of my legs, I put all my strength into my legs and leaped backward, my sword tucked into my armpit and pointing at his head.

My blow landed with a solid thud, and the old elf stumbled a little before regaining his balance.

"I guess I deserved that one!" he laughed, rubbing his forehead.

Tessia had been watching throughout all this—she'd been surprised at first, but after realizing it was just a spar, she relaxed. Now she took the opportunity to jump up and stomp toward the elder.

"Grandpa! You hurt Art too much. You should've gone easier on him," she

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scolded, pinching the elder's side.

"Ah! That hurts, little one," he said, but he was laughing as he lifted his granddaughter into his arms. "I'm afraid if I went easier on Arthur, the little brat would be the one bullying me," he told her gently.

Then he flashed in front of me and placed his right palm against my sternum.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Your body is in a dangerous state."

I stared blankly at him. With my constant use of mana rotation and meditation, my body should have been much healthier than even the most robust four-year-old's.

Noticing my doubtful gaze, Virion pressed his palm on my sternum at a certain angle, triggering a familiar searing pain.

"Your mana manipulation is good for a beginner, especially considering your age, and your sword techniques and fighting experience are frightening enough to make me wonder what sort of life you must have led to have learned all this." His eyes narrowed. "But you failed to mention one critical thing in your story earlier."

I could feel my heartbeat beginning to accelerate. Could he have found out about Sylvia?

"I've decided. Arthur, become my disciple!" He nodded decisively, throwing me entirely off guard.

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13

Q & A

I JUST STARED AT HIM, dumbfounded.

What is the old bat saying?

"What? You can't be serious, right?" I managed to blurt out.

He just tilted his head in response, and said, "Why not?"

"For one thing, I'm a human. Are humans even allowed to stay in this kingdom? Also, I need to make sure my family is okay and tell them I'm still alive," I argued.

At this, the old man went silent, and he pondered a bit before speaking again.

"Living here isn't a problem as long as you're under my protection. I've chosen to enjoy my old age instead of being burdened with the duties of the crown, but I still wield considerable power. As for your parents... is it an absolute necessity for you to see them in person?"

It was my turn to ponder.

"I... I guess seeing them in person isn't strictly a necessity. Although I miss them, the most important thing is finding out how they're doing, and letting them know that I'm okay," I answered.

"Then come with me tomorrow morning. I think I have the solution to that. Once that's taken care of, we can start your training right away."

I stared up at the senior in front of me, dubious of his intentions. "I don't understand why you want me as your disciple. And you seem to be in an awful rush. Why can't I go back home and spend a bit of time with my

parents, then return here to train with you?"

"I want you to be my disciple because I see your potential. Listen. An uncountable number of people have asked me to take them on as my disciple—rich and poor, young and old. But do you know how many I've taken on so far? None! These new generation brats bore me. These wealthy noble parents think they're qualified to ask me to be their kid's mentor just because they thought the brat was special."

I just furrowed my brows, not knowing where Virion was going with this.

"But you're different. I know you have exceptional talent in mana manipulation, and only the gods know how, but you possess better technique than even I do—but those aren't the reasons I decided to teach you. Arthur, I need to ask you: How are you a beast tamer?" All amusement had vanished from his sharp features, and he fixed me with a deathly gaze.

"Beast tamer? What are you talking about?" I was genuinely confused.

After a moment of silence, the elder said, "It's getting late. Tessia, it's time you went in to bed." Then he turned to me and said, "Let's go back inside and talk."

It didn't seem our conversation was going to end anytime soon.

He led me to a living room with a roaring fireplace. Sitting down on one of the couches, he said, "Let's start from the beginning. I assume you know that mana beasts possess mana cores, just like humans, elves, and dwarves, right?"

I nodded at this.

"Right. And just like mana beasts, the mana cores of humans, elves, and dwarves possess qualities distinct to their own race," Virion continued.

He took paper and pen from a nearby table and began drawing a chart. I peered over his shoulder to see.

- *Water—Ice*
- *Plant*
- *Earth—Gravity*

- *Magma, Metal*
- *Fire—Lightning*
- *Wind—Sound*

"These are the four basic elements and their higher forms," he said, looked at me to see if I understood. "The higher forms—ice, metal, lightning, sound—can only be controlled if a mage is especially adept at a particular basic element—in other words, a deviant. This is where the distinct racial qualities lie." He wrote a brief description under each race, explaining and elaborating as he went.

Humans:

4 basic elements

–deviants (healers/emitters)

"Human mages," he said as he scribbled, "possess the ability to manipulate all four basic elements. Humans are the only race whose deviants can control the higher form of their adept element. There are even human deviants who can transcend the four basic elements, like healers, or emitters, making their mana cores the most diverse."

He didn't pause to see if I had questions. His pen continued to fly across the page.

Elves:

Water, wind, earth

–No higher forms

–Plants (pure)

"Elven mages can only manipulate water, wind, and earth, but our natural affinities to these three elements are much higher than humans'. Our race is unique, in that some very pure-blooded mages are able to control plants. However, elves don't have deviants who can manipulate water, wind, and earth into their higher forms."

"Why—" I began, but he was racing ahead, intent on the lesson.

Dwarves:

Earth/fire: higher affinity

–Metal/magma

–No higher forms

"Dwarven mages can only manipulate earth and fire but, like elves, they possess a much higher affinity to those two elements. Their distinct trait lies in the fact that all dwarves can mold and bend metal. Some deviants also possess the ability to manipulate both earth and fire into magma, something even human deviants are not able to do, much less elves. However, dwarves can only manipulate those two basic elements and, like elves, are unable to control the higher forms of the basic elements."

"Wait," I said, studying his charts. "I'm not getting all of this. Why can't humans manipulate plants and magma?"

"Good question. Only elves can manipulate plants—the only living nature form—because of our lineage being highly affinitive to the nurturing elements. And only the dwarf race can manipulate magma and metal because, like us elves, their lineage makes them highly adept with the constructing elements."

I started rubbing the bridge of my nose as my brain whirled.

"Okay. I think I understand the differences between the three races, but what does that have to do with me being a beast tamer? What does that even mean, anyway?"

"I'm getting to that, brat," he barked. "Mana beasts are different from the three humanoid races, because each species has its own special characteristics. Listing them all would be endless so I'll give you a simple example: Mages—whether they are adventurers or not—are classified as E, D, C, B, A, AA, S, or SS-class. This classification is the same for mana beasts as well.

"Take the sonic hawk. They are B-class beasts which possess incredible speed while in flight. They have affinity for wind and sound. These attributes are innate in their mana cores. Regardless of the hawk's affinity, if the beast's

mana core is taken out and given to a human or elf mage specializing in the wind element, the mage's training will go by much faster than just cultivating mana from their surroundings. But that's the only impact it will have on the mage."

I waited impatiently while Virion gulped down a glass of water. Then he continued. "However! A mana beast of A-class or higher has the ability to pass on its 'will'—or ability, to be more precise—to one person. I called you a beast tamer earlier because you have a mana beast's will in your mana core. By my estimation, it's the will of an S-class mana beast, if not an SS-class. I'm able to sense this because I'm a beast tamer myself, although the beast I tamed was an AA-class, the shadow panther."

So *that's* how he was able to be so unusually fast.

Seeing the look of revelation on my face, Elder Virion chuckled. "Yes, brat, I was able to bully you that badly by utilizing my shadow panther's will. But I only used about half my speed." He shot me a wink.

He could move even *more* quickly?

Everything was beginning to make sense: the strange, faint markings that had appeared on my mana core after Sylvia gouged through it; how she had said my future progress would depend on understanding her power…

My eyes welled up and I lowered my head, trying to keep my tears from falling.

"You must have been through a lot, child. I'm not going to push you for an answer, but it is urgent that I guide you. You don't have much time." His voice was warm but stern.

"What do you mean?" I sniffled, looking up at him.

"The power from your mana core is too much for your immature body to handle. Let me ask you this, boy. Have you recently felt a burning pain coming from your mana core?" The look on my face must have given him the answer, because he nodded solemnly. "If you don't learn to control your new mana core, it'll destroy your body." He looked straight at me, dissolving any

doubt I may have had.

"I understand. It seems I have no choice but to be under your guidance," I said, trying to get my emotions under control. "However, I don't think I'll be able to focus on training without making sure that my family is all right and that they know I'm safe too. You mentioned something about that earlier…"

"What is it?" Elder Virion asked at my hesitation.

"Just trying to figure out how to best address you. Is 'Master' fine?"

"Just call me Grandpa from now on. My first disciple should at least be able to call me that. And who knows, maybe someday I'll become your grandpa-in-law." He shot me another wink.

My eyes widened in response, and he chuckled as he continued. "We'll go see an old friend of mine tomorrow who'll take care of your worries. What I need from you, starting now, is your utmost diligence. Even *I* am not sure how long it'll take for you to master the basics of your beast's will. In all my two hundred years, I've never seen such a young mage, let alone a beast tamer. You're going to bring big changes into this world, brat. I just know it."

I was taken aback, not by his praise, but by how casually he'd mentioned that he was over two hundred years old. I'd read that powerful mages were able to live longer, but it was still surprising to hear it in person.

"Go to sleep now, Arthur. Tomorrow's going to be a long day. You'll need the rest."

I got up and bowed before leaving the room. "Goodnight… Grandpa."

He chuckled, waving me off. I made my way back to my room, where I plopped onto my bed, too tired to even get under the covers.

I roused from sleep, grunting at the heavy sensation weighing down on my body.

Were they my worries? My burdens? The expectations placed on me? Were these things weighing down on me even as I slept?

"G'morning, Art! Wake up!"

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I opened my eyes to see that my burdens had taken the form of a lovely young lady very similar in appearance to my friend Tess.

"Come on, sleepyhead! You need to meet Grandpa soon. Hey! Don't go back to sleep!" She bounced up and down, crushing my ribs.

Was this how elven princesses acted? I doubted that the king and queen would approve…

"I get it! I'm up, Tess. Please get off my stomach so I can get up," I groaned, still half-asleep.

Tessia giggled. "Art, your hair looks funny. Hey, hey, is it true you're going to be staying here for a while? Grandpa told me this morning. I'm so happy! You're really staying, right? Right?" Tess had a wide smile pasted on her face.

How the hell was she so energetic this early in the morning?

Trying to tame my hair, I responded, "We'll know for sure after my trip with Elder Virion, but it seems I'll most likely be bothering you for a bit longer, Princess."

She stabbed my side with her finger. "Not 'Princess'. Tess! T-E-S-S! I'm going to get upset if you don't treat me better."

She was cute when she pouted.

"All right, all right. I have to shower and get ready, so I'll see you downstairs."

"You better hurry!" she chimed as she pranced out of the room.

Letting out a sigh, I removed my robe, making sure to keep the feather-wrapped stone safely inside, and hopped into the shower. The warm water washed away what was left of my fatigue after being awakened so roughly.

After drying myself and getting dressed, I made my way down the flight of curved stairs. A butler opened the front door for me as I approached. When I stepped out, I saw a small carriage waiting in front of the castle, with Grandpa Virion and Tess inside. The king and queen stood next to it, their backs to me, talking to Virion.

"Father, it is not appropriate for a human to be residing within this kingdom."
"Alduin is right, Elder Virion. Although saving Tessia is something I will forever be grateful to the child for, having a human stay here goes against all traditions."
Virion leaned back lazily inside the carriage.
"Bah! Screw traditions," he snorted. "I've taken a liking to that boy, and so has Tessia, haven't you, child?"
"Grandpa! It's not like that! He's just…" Her voice trailed off at the end, face glowing.
Virion laughed. "Anyway, he's going to be under my direct guidance from now on. Make sure to let everyone know that he is not to be trifled with."
"Father—"
"*Enough!* This isn't a political decision, but a personal wish of mine. I hope you can respect that. Oh, brat! You're here," he called, his expression changing to a smile as soon as he saw me. "Come! We should hurry."
I nodded, then turned to the king and queen and bowed, pretending not to see their frowns.

A few minutes into our journey, I turned to Grandpa Virion. "Hey, Gramps, where are we headed, anyway? You said we were meeting a friend of yours, right?"
"'Gramps,' eh?" he replied with a chuckle. "Well, aren't you awfully comfortable with me now. Good, good! As for where we're going, it's a surprise." He threw me a wink.
Tessia must have been tired from waking up so early—she had fallen asleep, her head leaning against my shoulder.
"Take good care of her, Art. She grew up in a very lonely environment," Grandpa Virion muttered. A look of compassion filled his eyes as he looked at his sleeping granddaughter.
"What do you mean?"

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"Growing up as the only princess of an entire kingdom is very stressful—too much for a child to handle. She has no close friends, and it has been hard on her. Tessia has been hurt too many times by people pretending to care about her, only to use her for their personal gains. This has made her often cold and distant to those around her. Imagine how surprised we all were when we saw you two holding hands."

"I noticed that when I heard her talk to the guards," I said.

"Arthur, Tessia has shown more emotion, more smiles and laughter, than she ever did growing up; around you, she finally seems more like a child. For that, I thank you." He patted my shoulder.

The carriage came to a gentle halt, and the driver opened the door to inform us of our arrival.

"Hey, Tess, we're here," I whispered, gently nudging her.

She eventually stirred awake and we got out of the carriage, finding ourselves in front of what could only be described as a hut.

Grandpa Virion strode to the door and began pounding on it, yelling, "Hey, you old witch! Come out!"

The door flew open to reveal a hunched, elderly lady whose grey hair looked as if it had been struck by lightning. Her wrinkled eyes were a strange mixture of colors, all blending together, and she was dressed in a simple brown robe. She barely glanced at Virion before peering down at me with an appraising eye.

"Took you long enough to get here," she muttered.

"Arthur, let me introduce you to Rinia Darcassan. She's a very special deviant amongst us elves," Grandpa Virion announced.

"It's good seeing you again, Virion. Charming as always, little Tessia," she smiled, patting Tess's head.

Then, looking at me again, she stuck out her hand. "We finally meet, young Arthur. Call me Rinia. I am a diviner."

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14

WHAT'S TO COME

Grandpa Virion, Tessia, Rinia, and I had situated ourselves around a circular table. A jar of water rested in the middle.

I stared curiously at the jar of water, then ventured, "Elder Rinia, I'm a little lost as to what it is a diviner does. Gramps said you'd be able to tell me if my parents are okay."

One of the ancient elf's thin, white brows rose. "'Gramps,' is it, Virion? You've really let yourself go if you're letting youngsters like him call you that."

"Bah! He's an exception," Virion said with a grin, looking at me. "If any other brat dares to call me something like Gramps, I'll have them hung upside down and beaten with a cactus."

Glaring at me, she barked, "So, you little whelp! You don't even know where your parents are, but still you want to travel all over Sapin, find them, and then come back to train? You'd be dead by the time you got yourself back here."

I looked at Grandpa Virion. *Did he tell her...?*

As if he knew what I was thinking, he smiled and said, "I didn't tell Rinia any of this. There isn't much you can hide from her, but she doesn't usually bother looking too deeply into a person." His smile had faded as he spoke, and now he directed a worried gaze toward the elderly lady. "What's made you so nosy, Rinia?"

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"You and I both know he's special. In fact, there are parts of his life that even *I* can't see. Arthur, whatever beast it was that passed its will onto you, it was no ordinary creature. Limiting it to an SS-class wouldn't do it justice." She pondered for a bit before continuing. "Enough about that, though. Arthur, you're here to see your parents, so that's what I'll help you do. Close your eyes for a moment and picture your parents. Focus on their appearance and their mana signature. I'll take care of the rest."

I closed my eyes and imagined the last time I had seen them both together—my father badly wounded, my mother healing him.

"You can open your eyes now."

I looked at her to see the colors swirling in her eyes. The water had floated out of the jar and formed a spiraling disk in midair. Suddenly, I saw my parents in the water.

I bolted up, flipping over my chair as I leaned in as close to the table as I could get. I saw my mother and father together, sitting around a dining table. It didn't seem to be our home in Ashber. My mother's face was a bit pale, and she was saying something to my father. I could tell that she had lost a bit of weight, but looked healthy otherwise. *Her stomach!* It was evident now that she was pregnant; her belly had a noticeable bulge. My father looked much the same as ever. He was wearing some kind of uniform, though, and was sporting a beard.

I could feel hot tears running uncontrollably down my face, but I didn't dare take my eyes from the image of my parents.

They're alive! They're doing okay! They're fine.

"Th-thank you, Elder Rinia," I managed to say in a sniffled stammer. "Thank you, truly, for showing me this."

She looked a little uncomfortable at my emotional display, and just waved me off. "Let me see where they are now."

The image zoomed out, and I could see the outside of the building they were in. Just as I had suspected, it was definitely not our home in Ashber. Zooming

out even further, I could see the layout of the city they were staying in.
"It seems they've made their home in Xyrus," Rinia said, a contented look on her face. "That makes things simpler for us."
Tess was patting my back, obviously upset to see me crying, but her gaze didn't leave the swirling water. I faintly heard her mumble, "Art's parents…"
But Grandpa Virion clapped his hands together and stood up.
"All right, Arthur! Let's let your parents know that you're alive!"
According to Grandpa Virion, strict regulations controlled communications between the kingdoms of Elenoir and Sapin. However, Rinia, as a diviner who had not been discovered by the kingdom of Sapin, allowed us a certain freedom from those regulations.
"I'm going to put your voice directly into your parents' minds," Rinia said. "Here's how it works: I will pour some of my innate mana into you, establishing a temporary link. When I give you the signal, start speaking as if you're talking to your parents. It's important to know that they will hear your voice inside their heads, so they may not believe what you're saying at first. You must get them to believe that it really is you speaking to them, and that they're not going crazy. Remember, we're just doing this to let them know you're still alive. I can't keep the connection up for long, so think about what you need to say. You'll have about two minutes." Her gaze was serious.
I prepared myself, and nodded to show her I was ready.
"Begin… *now*."
Her whole body began glowing the same indescribable color as her eyes, and I could see the glow spreading to me as well.
Taking a deep breath, I gathered my thoughts and concentrated.
Hi, Mom; hi, Dad. It's me, Arthur. You're probably really surprised that you're hearing my voice inside your head, but there's a reason for that. Before that, though, I want you to know that I'm alive and well. I'm alive, Mom, Dad; I'm safe. I managed to survive the fall off the cliff and I'm currently living in the kingdom of Elenoir with the elves. Please don't tell

anyone else this. I don't have much time, so I'll be brief.

A friend of mine is a deviant—like you, Mom, except she's a diviner. I was able to see how you guys are doing just now, as well. She's also the reason you can hear my voice. I want to come back home as soon as possible, but I can't right now. I... I'm safe and alive, but I have a sort of... er... illness that I need to take care of before I can come back. Don't worry—as long as I stay here and have the elves treat me, I'm going to be okay. So please, don't worry. I don't know when I'll be able to talk to you like this again, but what's important is that I'm alive and I know you're all right.

Dad, Mom, you should both be hearing my voice right now—confirm it with each other if you still can't believe it. Remember, don't tell anyone where I am. It's better if you keep acting as if I were still dead—that will make things simpler. It may take months or even years before I can come back, but be sure that I WILL make it back to you. I love you so much and... and I miss you. Stay safe, and Dad, make sure to keep Mom and my baby sibling safe. Mom, please make sure Dad doesn't get into trouble. I love you both.

I had trouble keeping my eyes open against the tears that poured continuously down my face. I stood silent, rubbing my eyes as I fought to keep from breaking down. The glow faded around us, and Elder Rinia collapsed back into her chair, sweating and pale.

"Elder Rinia, I don't know how to thank you for this," I managed to croak out.

"Train well and continue to cherish those close to you, child. That's how you'll thank me," she answered with a weak smile. "And don't forget to drop in once in a while. This grandma here gets lonely!"

I gave her a tight hug, making her almost jump, and she eventually succumbed to my cuteness and hugged me in return before shooing all of us away.

As we walked out, I noticed Tess pouting a little, looking at my chest.

By the time we arrived back at the castle, it was already dark. A maid greeted us at the door, but before I had the chance to go back into my room, I saw the king and queen.

The king approached me first.

"Arthur, I know you overheard what we were saying earlier today, and I apologize for that. Years of being a ruler has made me a bit old-fashioned, and I was unreasonably stubborn on your not belonging here."

His voice faltered, but the queen continued for her husband, taking my hands in hers. "You are now Elder Virion's first disciple," she said. "This is more than enough reason for all of us to accept you. Even if that weren't the case, you saved our daughter. Please consider this place your home. I know you miss your parents dearly but if I can be of any consolation, don't hesitate—please treat me as you would your own mother." She gave me a sincere smile.

"Papa! Mama!" Tess exclaimed, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. Then she ran to her parents and hugged them both.

I smiled back, thanking them as well. They were good people—good people who were simply looking out for their kingdom.

Standing behind us, Grandpa Virion nodded at us all with a look of approval, before exclaiming, "Brat! Training starts tomorrow, so sleep early."

I woke with an immense pain consuming my body, as if I were on fire. Cold sweat covered my skin and the feeling of burning intensified.

I groaned and doubled over, trying to endure. Then the door swung open and Grandpa Virion was at my side.

"It's getting worse…" I gasped.

He placed both hands on my sternum, where my mana core was located, and began to transmit his own mana into me.

The pain slowly subsided and I was left panting, my clothes drenched in sweat.

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"Thank you," I managed to wheeze.
Without acknowledging my thanks, he replied, "It's a bit early, but let's start training now."
Looking out the window, I saw that the sun had not yet risen. But I probably wasn't going to be able to fall asleep again anyway, so I nodded and followed him out into the courtyard.
We sat cross-legged, facing each other. He took a long look at me before explaining. "Until now, you've been purifying your mana core and manipulating your mana using your mana channels. While this method is sufficient for normal mages, we beast tamers can't rely on this approach. Instead, we do something called assimilation."
My face must have shown that I had no idea what he was talking about.
"Don't worry, you'll know soon enough. Essentially it means integrating the mana from your core directly into your body's bones and muscles—hence the term 'assimilation.' Unfortunately, throughout the period of assimilating, your mana core won't develop at all, but that isn't the point. Once the mana from your new core is absorbed throughout your body, you'll be able to start utilizing your beast's will."
So that was what Sylvia had meant! All along—during the journey through the Forest of Elshire and while meeting the royal family and Grandpa Virion—I had wondered if Sylvia had somehow planned this all out. Now I was convinced she had.
"Slowly release the mana from your core—and don't be tempted to use your mana channels. Instead, let the mana seep out into your body, and let your muscles and bones absorb it. This will take time and effort, but as you progress, your body should reject your mana core less and less," Virion instructed. "There isn't much I can help you with during the first part of your training, other than making sure your mana is distributed evenly throughout your body and relieving you when you have spasms, like earlier."
So passed the early days of my training, during which I did little else but sit

in meditation, dispersing the mana from my core and into my body. I had gotten the hang of it after a few days, but it was becoming clear how long a journey this would be. Directing my mana to form a core when I was an infant had taken a few years, but this process was the exact opposite—with more mana *and* the extra step of assimilating the mana directly into the muscles and bones.

I didn't leave the castle during this time, because I couldn't know when the spasms might strike again. I was grateful to Grandpa Virion for sticking by me. Unfortunately for Tess, I had very little time left to play with her. When I wasn't meditating, I was resting in my room, my body aching from being imbued with mana. But that didn't stop her from simply barging in and chattering at me about her day.

After several weeks of assimilation, the painful spasms were occurring less frequently and Virion finally pronounced it safe for me to go out into the city. That evening before bed, I promised Tess I'd go touring around the city of Zestier with her the next day.

Tess was waiting outside my room, looking adorable. She was wearing a white sleeveless sundress with a sheer white cardigan over it. The light pink sunhat on her head was decorated with a pale flower, giving her a fresh and doll-like appearance.

"Took you long enough. Hurry, let's hurry!" She grabbed my hand, half-dragging me as I forced my aching body to keep up the pace.

The amazement I had felt when I had first seen the city of Zestier had not dissipated. After stepping off the carriage we start walking, taking time to visit the numerous stalls and stores that the city had to offer. We were met with a lot of stares—probably because of the fact that a human child was holding hands with the kingdom's only princess. I was used to being the center of attention in my previous life, so it didn't bother me. What did bother me, however, was that, while most of these gazes held only curiosity, some were filled with blatant hostility.

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Coming out of the armor shop, I had just moved out of the way for someone when an elven child bumped my shoulder.

"Well, if it isn't the *human* Elder Virion has taken under his wing," he remarked snidely. "I've heard all about you. Gross, I got human germs on my clothes." A look of disgust was pasted on his face.

The child couldn't have been much older than Tess, and by his clothing, the attendants who followed behind him, and his group of friends, it was clear he was a noble.

After spending so much time with Tess, I had almost forgotten how immature children were. I couldn't help but think that, whether elf or human, spoiled nobles always seemed to act as if they'd been taught from the same manual.

He turned to face Tess, his facing transforming into a well-practiced smile as he offered her his hand. "Princess, it is beneath you to be with this human child. Allow me to escort you for the afternoon," he urged, expecting Tess to take his hand.

Without even looking in his direction, Tess linked her arm in mine and said coldly, "Art, let's go. There is a bug over there, and I don't want to accidentally step on it with my new shoes."

As I was pulled away, I glanced back, shooting the boy a look of pity—which seemed to infuriate him even more.

"Hold it, human! I'm not done with you!" he shouted, rushing up and gripping my shoulder. "I heard you're pretty talented for a human mage. I happen to be a pretty well-known genius around here myself. My mana core has already reached red stage, and, in addition to water manipulation, my mother says I'll soon even be able to manipulate plants."

I responded with a saccharine expression of surprise and awe. "Oh, my word! Princess Tessia! It seems we are in the presence of pure brilliance here. I am not worthy!"

Tess let out a giggle, not even bothering to hide her amusement.

"I'll be sure to give you proper respect, Lord Genius of the Elves. Now if

you'll excuse us…"
As I started leading Tess away, a handkerchief flew past us, landing on the ground.
Turning back, I saw the noble brat, his face as red as a tomato, glaring at me. The attendants and friends all let out quiet gasps.
"How dare you challenge the disciple of Elder Virion to a duel! You may be of noble blood, Feyrith, but you should still know your place! Take it back," Tessia ordered, her eyes narrowed in a glare.
"My apologies, Princess. I'll do as I'm told," Feyrith said. He then turned his gaze toward me. "But I'm sure you wouldn't object if this human were the one to issue the challenge. After all, a disciple of Elder Virion himself must know better than to just run back with his tail between his legs, right?"
My lips curved up into a smirk. The boy sure had a way with words.
I gave Tessia a reassuring nod before turning back to Feyrith. Ignoring my initial instinct to let the taunt go, I called his bluff. "Sure. Why not?"
I didn't want to cause a scene since I was a visitor, but after weeks of meditating and feeling stifled, my body was eager for the chance to fight.
"Princess, please do the honor of initiating the duel," Feyrith said, polishing his black wand with his sleeve.
Tess rolled her eyes as she took another step back. "Let the duel commence."
Though my mana core was still in the early stages of dark red, I could feel mana strengthening every fiber of my muscles as I dashed toward Feyrith.
It was over in an instant. He was too cocky—he hadn't even taken the necessary precautions to find out whether I was an augmenter or conjurer. I was within arm's length before he even began his chant.
I sank my palm into his gut, forcing the air out of his lungs. He flew backward, tumbling to the floor. I was glad I had used my palm; he was wearing a sturdy chainmail underneath his clothes.
Feyrith's attendants and friends looked on, their eyes wide, and Tessia ran to me and pulled at my arm. Gratified by the shocked looks on everyone's faces,

I let her lead me away.

"I'm so stupid," she said as we made our way down the row of stalls toward our carriage.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"I should've told you this before you started—in a duel, there are certain unsaid customs. One is that the challenger waits for his opponent to make the first move," she sighed, berating herself as we got in the carriage.

"So I should've waited for him to attack first?"

Tessia nodded. She began telling me more of these customs on the ride back, one of which was that informal duels between nobles are demonstrations of magic, not actual fighting. What Feyrith had meant when he had proposed a duel was that we should simply take turns showing off our respective magic talent.

"So you just smacked the poor boy into the air?" Gramps had an amused expression on his face when he heard the story after we had arrived back at the castle.

"Basically," I grinned back.

"Wish I was there for that," he said, amused.

"Grampa!" Tessia scolded. "You're responsible for this too!"

"How was I supposed to know he'd get into a fight the first time he goes to town?" he laughed.

It was a tad disappointing to realize that the look of shock from everyone around us wasn't from my fighting prowess but from the fact that I had violated the customs of the duel. Nevertheless, I had enjoyed my time out.

After that, I chose to spend most of my time in the manor, keeping myself out of trouble and maintaining an ascetic lifestyle—meditating with Grandpa Virion in the morning, spending a little time with Tessia in the afternoon, and training by myself at night. Now and then I sent messages to my parents, letting them know I was still alive and that I missed them dearly.

In this way, three years went by.

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REYNOLDS LEYWIN:

I couldn't believe it.

My son. My son was gone.

"Noooo! No, no, no!" I was incoherent with grief. I tried to jump off the cliff myself to save Arthur, but Durden held me back.

I knew it was too late. I knew the worst had already happened but I couldn't just stand still, doing nothing.

"Let me go! My son! He could still be alive. Let me save my son! *Please.*" I struggled, but Durden wasn't budging. Then Adam was there, helping him hold on to me.

"Please, Rey. You have to hold it together. There's no easy way to tell you this, but it's not possible for him to have survived that fall." The ever-playful and easy-going Adam wore a solemn expression; he couldn't even meet my eyes.

"Adam's right. You have to pull yourself together, Rey. Your wife needs you," Durden muttered.

They were right. They were absolutely right. Yet… Why would my body not listen to me? Why couldn't I go comfort my wife?

A scream tore from my throat, then everything went black.

When I woke up, Helen was holding a wet towel against my head.

"You're finally awake," she said, giving me a smile that was sympathetic but lacked confidence.

I ignored her and sat up, burying my face in my hands.

"This isn't a dream, is it? Please tell me I'm going to wake up to see my boy playing with Jasmine and Adam."

She managed to mutter, "I'm sorry," before she started sniffling as well.

The flap of the tent was pulled aside and Durden made his way in.

"Reynolds. I can't begin to imagine how much you must be hurting," he said, "but right now, your wife needs you. She's blaming herself, Rey. She thinks

you hate her for losing your child." The redness of his eyes gave evidence that he was having a hard time as well.

Unable to muster up any words in response, I turned away from Durden.

I felt a sharp jerk as I was pulled back. I caught a glimpse of Durden's large hand, then my vision blurred and there was a stinging pain throbbing on my cheek, where he had smacked me.

"Reynolds! We had to stop Alice from killing herself," he growled. "This isn't the time to be moping. Get off your sorry ass and take care of the one who's actually alive!"

I had never seen Durden, who was usually so composed, this infuriated.

I managed a stiff nod, my brain still throbbing from the blow, and made my way to my wife's tent.

She was curled up under a blanket, Angela at her side, patting her gently. I gave Angela a meaningful look. Understanding what I wanted, she simply nodded and excused herself from the tent.

"Alice," I said tenderly, but she didn't respond. "Honey. Can I see my wife's beautiful face?"

"…child," I heard her say faintly.

"What was that, honey?" I responded, stroking her back.

"I killed our child!" She bolted up and turned to face me. "I killed our son, Reynolds. It was my fault! If… if I hadn't been there, he could've dodged that. He could have lived. He sacrificed himself to save me! It was my fault."

I pulled my wife toward me and held her tight, softly kissing the top of her head over and over. I kept my eyes shut tightly, fighting back my own tears as she sobbed against my chest.

After a while her sobs turned into dry whimpers, but still we sat there together.

"You don't hate me?" I was barely able to hear her whisper.

"How could I ever hate you? Alice. I love you and I always will."

"…I miss him so much, Rey." She began sobbing again.

I clenched my jaws, willing myself to stay strong for my wife's sake. "I… I know, honey. I miss him too."

The rest of the journey was slow and arduous. Not physically—no, it felt as if even the wild animals knew of our emotional torment and steered clear of us. Our group advanced without unnecessary conversation. Adam's occasional attempts to lighten the mood were met with a crushing silence. Even the cheerful Angela bore a solemn face throughout the rest of the journey.

Alice and I fell asleep together each night in each other's arms. I managed to console her, and it helped me as well. I needed an excuse. I was the one who had sent Arthur to protect Alice. I kept trying to find people to blame, but the ones who were actually at fault were already dead. Revenge had already been taken. All I was left with was a dark hole of emptiness and regret.

The only thing keeping Alice and me sane was our unborn child. For that child, my child, I had to endure. I wasn't going to make the same mistakes I had made with Arthur. He was only a child, but I'd sent him off to protect my wife against grown fighters, even a mage.

I had no one to blame but myself.

We arrived at the floating city of Xyrus, coming through the teleportation gate with no further complications. It was as if the gods were mocking us by saying we'd been through enough.

The Twin Horns stood uncertainly around me and Alice. We had planned to go our separate ways from here.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Adam gave us a rare concerned look.

Durden added, "We don't mind staying with you for a few more days. I know you originally came to this city for Arthur but…" He didn't finish the sentence.

"It's okay." I waved them off, trying to force a smile. "You have your own agenda. Alice and I have all the necessities, and enough money to live on for a couple of weeks. Keep your positions updated in the Guild Hall."

"Will do. Take care, guys. We'll see each other soon," Durden replied,

hugging us both. The girls also gave Alice a warm hug as they said their goodbyes.

When they had left, I turned to my wife, giving her a serious look. "Alice, what do you say about living here from now on?"

"What about our house?" she replied. "We just got it all fixed up. Most of our stuff is still there."

I shook my head. "I think it'll be better for us to have fresh new surroundings. Our home in Ashber… it has too many memories of Art. I don't think we'll be able to stand it if we stay there. We can hire some merchants to bring our things here from Ashber."

She looked down, thinking, before giving me a small nod. "What about a job? How will we afford to live here? This is a very expensive city to live in, Rey," she added, a worried look on her face.

For once, I was able to muster up a real smile, a sincere one. They were so rare these days. "I have an old friend who lives here. He's asked me several times to be his guard over the years, and we still keep in touch from time to time. He's a fairly well-known merchant in this area and has a large manor. I'm sure he'll have a place for us to stay. They're good people, Alice."

She looked a little doubtful at first, but when we arrived at the manor and were greeted warmly by my old friend, her worries lessened.

"Rey! My friend! The hero who saved my life! What brings you to this little city?" he exclaimed as he let go of me, patting my arms.

Vincent Helstea was a thin, bespectacled man who always wore a suit—a man of brains, not brawn. Vincent was a normal human, lacking any mage gifts, but a very successful one. The Helstea House had been in the trading business for generations. The family had been in decline for the past few decades, but Vincent had single-handedly restored his family's assets to new heights by building the first Helstea Auction House in Xyrus, followed by several other auction houses in neighboring cities.

He had been visiting a remote city where he was building an auction house

when he had run into trouble with bandits. I had been with him at the time, in my Guild-assigned role as escort, and I saved him. We had become good friends by the end of his visit.

Curious about the commotion raised by our reunion, Vincent's wife and daughter soon joined us.

"Tabitha!" Vincent exclaimed. "Meet my dear friend, Reynolds, and his wife, Alice. Alice, Reynolds, this is my wife, Tabitha—and this lovely lady here is my daughter, Lilia." He picked up his daughter as he spoke. She looked to be the around the same age as Art, with lovely hazel eyes that remind me of a kitten and long brown hair in a simple braid. My heart ached as I thought what a beautiful young lady she would grow into in the future.

A future she still has...

Forcing myself away from my dark thoughts, I greeted Vincent's family. "Tabitha! It's great to finally meet you. Vince told me so much about you during our trip together to Elshire City. And what a lovely daughter you have."

My wife exchanged pleasantries with Tabitha, and Vincent urged us into the living room to get comfortable.

"So what brings you here, Rey? Last time you sent me a letter, you said you'd got yourself settled all the way up in Ashber." He handed us each a glass of wine.

I took a deep breath and told them the story through gritted teeth.

"I had no idea. I'm so sorry for your loss," Vincent managed to say. His wife had covered her mouth with her hand, looking stricken. "I wouldn't know what to do if I lost Lilia. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I awkwardly scratched my cheek. "You've asked me several times to teach your auction house guards a thing or two about magic. Is that offer still on the table? If it is, you would be doing me a huge favor. I just need enough to rent a small house around here—we can live a simple life. It's just that I don't want my wife to go back to our old home in Ashber, where Arthur was born

and raised."

A big grin appeared on Vincent's face. "Nonsense! No friend of mine is going to be sleeping in some little hut somewhere. As a matter of fact, I have been looking for a suitable tenant. We just renovated our Helstea Auction House to accommodate three times as many people, and we have a fresh new batch of augmenter recruits who really need some work around the edges, so I haven't been home as often as Tabitha would like."

"He's right," Tabitha agreed.

Vincent went on, switching glances between my wife and me. "You'd be doing all of us a favor if you moved in. That way, Alice could keep my wife off my bu—I mean keep her busy—and you could work for me at the auction house and help shape up the new recruits. That is, if you haven't already found a job."

I wasn't sure what to say; he had turned my initial desperate request around, framing it as if *I* would be doing *him* a favor. With a nod and a smile, I shook his outstretched hand. "It'd be my pleasure to work for you."

Though I was restless to start working, Vincent wouldn't allow it, saying we needed time to get situated so I would be in the best state to train his augmenters. Vincent also firmly insisted that we live with them in the manor. Tabitha was always complaining, he said, about the place being too big and empty. Though we were reluctant at first, Alice and I eventually got ourselves settled into the left wing of the manor. Vincent was quite generous, saying we could have several rooms in case we wanted more babies in the future. Tabitha had to pull her husband away by his ear as he grinned, waving us goodbye.

Another unforeseen blessing was how well Alice and Tabitha hit it off. I was worried that Alice would be lonely once I started working, but Tabitha had nothing to do with her time other than take care of Lilia, so having Alice around really brightened up her day. Tabitha's company was a welcome source of distraction for Alice.

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Once I started working, I stayed busy training the new recruits. These mages were not the most talented, but they were willing to work hard. I felt like they'd make a pretty solid team of guards in the course of a few months, once I pounded the essentials into their heads. Of course, all the elite mages, both conjurers and augmenters, were attending school at Xyrus Academy, so the ones who didn't want to be adventurers ended up being hired as guards for rich nobles, like Vincent, which was also much safer.

It had been a few months since Alice and I had first arrived in Xyrus, and we were slowly growing accustomed to the city life. Alice's belly was getting larger by the day and, while she still had reoccurring nightmares about losing Arthur, having Tabitha and Lilia around was a source of comfort. Arriving home one evening, I was welcomed by the delicious smell of beef stew. Vincent and Tabitha had gone out for the evening and Alice had promised to watch over Lilia. Lilia was already tucked in, so it was a late dinner for just the two of us.

"This beef stew looks amazing, Alice. What's the occasion?" I grinned at her. She smiled softly. "It's been a while since I've cooked for you. This used to be your favorite dish. Art's too."

Her face turned downcast, but before I had the chance to console her—

'Hi, Mom; hi, Dad. It's me, Arthur…'

I froze. It was Art's voice. *No. I'm just hearing things.*

I looked at Alice while the voice continued to talk in my head. Her face was distraught as she looked around the room. Was she hearing voices too?

'I'm alive, Mom, Dad; I'm safe. I managed to survive the fall off the cliff…'

What was going on? My son was alive? Kingdom of Elenoir? Illness?

'It may take months or even years before I can come back, but be sure that I WILL make it back to you. I love you so much and… and I miss you. Stay safe, and Dad, make sure to keep Mom and my baby sibling safe. Mom, please make sure Dad doesn't get into trouble. I love you both.'

I looked at my wife again.
"You just heard the voice now too, right, Rey?" she blurted, her voice edged with desperation. "Please tell me it wasn't just me who heard it."
"Y-yeah. I… I just heard Art's voice." I was still unable to make any sense of it.
"He… He's alive! Honey! Our baby is alive! Oh my goodness…" Alice had fallen to her knees, and her voice trailed off into weeping—but it was clear from the smile on her face that they were tears of joy.
Hell, even I was crying. My son was alive! "Arthur's alive!" I laughed like a madman.

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15

NEXT STEP

"Hey, Art! Hurry up! We're going to be late!"

"Tess! Stop," I cried. "I give! I *give*!"

Tess finally let go of me, releasing me from the leg lock.

"Isn't there a gentler way of waking me up, Tess?" I grumbled, massaging the feeling back into my leg.

"It's getting harder and harder to wake you up in the morning. I have to do something, right? Besides, you should be grateful to have such a pretty lady waking you up every morning." She fluttered her eyes at me.

"I find the maids here plenty pretty, thank you very much," I muttered under my breath.

She must've heard that, because she gave me a pinch to the side.

What happened to the shy Tess, the girl who was too scared to sleep alone in the tent? The sweet Tess who begged me not to go? Bring her back! I liked her better!

In my three years of living in Elenoir I'd learned that elves awakened as a mage much earlier than humans do. Whereas the average age of awakening for a human is around thirteen, for elves it usually happens around the age of ten.

Tess had awakened early, even for an elf. It had happened a few months ago —and boy, did she awaken with a bang. It wasn't as big as when I'd first awakened, but she'd managed to destroy her room upstairs and fell through

the hole in the floor, creating a small crater in the kitchen just below. Since then, she had been joining me in my training with Gramps. Since awakening, she had become much more confident and bold—in more bad ways than good.

She knew how strong I was physically, so she had no hesitation about using me as her sandbag when she tried the new spells Grandpa Virion and other conjurers had taught her. What she just didn't seem to understand, even after all my complaints, was that I still felt pain, damn it!

As for me, it was a very special day; after more than three years, I had finally completed the assimilation of mana into my body. Tess had turned nine a couple of months ago, and it was almost my birthday, so I would finally be turning eight. During my time in Elenoir, I hadn't been allowed to absorb any mana from my surroundings and was only permitted to spread the innate mana, formed in my mana core, throughout my body. The ceremony planned for today was the final step of a beast tamer's assimilation.

I skipped showering and just changed into a more presentable robe, tucking Sylvia's stone into my robe before heading out into the courtyard. Over these past few years, I'd kept the stone close to me at all times, always panicking if my fingers couldn't feel the stone's smooth surface in my pocket.

"Finally awake, eh, Art? And how did your wife wake you up today? Hah!" Grandpa Virion was sipping tea at the small table outside.

"Ugh, wife? I didn't know you could marry demons. You're turning her into a monster, Gramps," I groaned, but I kept my voice down, as Tess was just moments behind me.

"She's going to grow up into a fine woman, Art. Better sweep her off her feet before it's too late," he chuckled, lifting his teacup in a toast.

Tess arrived in time to hear his comment, but she just blushed and elbowed me in the side.

"Agh!" *Why? What did I do?*

"Well, Art, are you ready?" Gramps asked. "Today is finally the day. After

this, you'll be a true beast tamer, not just one of those lucky adventurers who has a beast will." He crossed his arms emphatically.
I gave him a firm nod as Tess headed to the table where Gramps was sitting and settled herself in to watch.
It wasn't much of a ceremony; Gramps would just exert a large amount of mana into my core, which would trigger a surge of mana that I would have to direct and spread throughout my body.
"Do you remember the basic phases of beast tamers, Art?" he quizzed.
I recited the lessons he had been pounding into me these past years. "All beast tamers have various forms they can will their bodies into. The number of forms depends on the strength of the beast's will in the mana core. The first phase, which all beast tamers possess, is known as 'acquire.' In this phase, the tamer can utilize a small portion of the inherent ability of their beast. The second stage is called 'integrate,' where the tamer's body is wholly infused with the beast's will, allowing much better control over their beast's abilities."
"Correct," Gramps said. "The phases that the beast tamers are able to unlock simply show how much of their beast's will they can utilize. The stronger the beast, the harder it is—and if the tamer can't get insight, it is impossible to get past the first stage. One thing to remember, however—the integrate stage is not always more powerful than the acquire. The acquire phase involves tapping into a specific inherent ability of your beast's, while integrate is an all-encompassing power-up using your beast's will." His face was deathly serious as he reviewed the material I'd been studying so hard.
"I didn't tell you earlier, but now that you are about to become a true beast tamer, you should understand the differences in how a tamer acquires a beast's will. If the beast is killed and the mana core is extracted with its will still intact, a mage can absorb the will to gain insights. That mage would be considered a forged tamer. While it is easier and straightforward to be a forged tamer, the likelihood of gaining insight is very limited. One of the

reasons it took me so long to be able to break into the second phase is that I am a forged tamer. I consider myself lucky to even be able to break into the second stage, though. Arthur, you are one of the extremely rare legacy tamers —a tamer whose beast voluntarily imparted its will." Grandpa Virion's eyes studied me intently as he spoke.

He paused for a moment to let that sink in before continuing. "My first phase doesn't really make me that much faster, but I'm able to erase a bit of my presence and blend myself into the shadows. But you haven't seen my second phase, have you? Watch carefully. It took me more than ten years to make the breakthrough into this phase."

I flinched as a powerful surge of mana surrounded Virion. Suddenly the mana around him seeped back into his body, and my eyes widened.

Grandpa's skin had turned pitch black. Even the whites of his eyes had become black, while his pupils had narrowed to sharp, cat-like slits, and his irises had turned a bright, glowing yellow. His white hair, now unbound from its ties, was also a rich, shiny black. The aura surrounding him made me shudder and take a step back.

"This is the integrate phase," he growled, his voice much raspier than before. "I'm going to sneak up behind you. Pay attention."

Is it really 'sneaking up' if he tells me—

But then he disappeared from my vision. I couldn't feel his presence at all, but when I looked behind me as he had instructed, his finger was already pressed against my jugular. He gazed down at me with his glowing yellow eyes.

Fast. It seemed like instant teleportation, but I knew it wasn't—there were marks left in the earth at the site of his initial position. It was a speed that even I couldn't begin to keep up with. But the scary part wasn't his insane speed. It was his complete lack of presence. Even when he was directly behind me, I couldn't sense him.

His appearance shifted back to normal, his face slightly flushed, and Tessia

began clapping as if this were a show. He was breathing heavily.
"Using that form always takes a toll on me," he said. "After training with it for a couple of decades, I'm able to maintain the form for a bit less than an hour. In my acquire phase, I am simply channeling a small portion of my beast's will, and I'm able to borrow the speed and stealth of the shadow panther. However, with my integrate phase, not only do my speed and stealth increase, but my senses are also heightened to keep up."
I nodded in understanding.
"Good! Now let's begin the ceremony," he replied, clasping his hands together.
We stood face to face, only an arm's length apart. Tess was leaning forward in excitement.
"Just let your mana come out freely," he instructed. "Don't try to control anything. I'll restrain you if necessary. It's crucial that you keep a relaxed state of mind and rouse the particles of mana you've assimilated over the years."
When I nodded in response, he began exerting mana into my core, flooding my core with his mana along with my own.
I instantly felt a warm sensation, like a gust of hot air flowing in and out of my pores.
I felt my body reaching its limit—then a loud explosion startled me out of my concentration. I looked around in time to see Gramps being flung back; Tess fell back into her chair, as well.
An unbearable pain surged through my body, as if my very skeleton was trying to crawl out of my skin. I couldn't summon even the strength to scream. My vision darkened and I welcomed it, because I knew it would relieve me of my pain.
I woke up back in my bed.
I sat up, feeling surprisingly refreshed. Sitting at my side, her head resting across my legs, was Tess. Looking at her sleeping like this, I was reminded of

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when I had escorted her back home after saving her from the slave traders.
After a few minutes, Grandpa walked in and sat down on the other side of the bed, not bothering to wake his slumbering granddaughter.
"How do you feel, brat?" His lips curled up into a half grin.
"I should be asking you that, Gramps. I saw you get sent flying; even Tess was knocked over."
He let out an embarrassed chuckle. "I have to admit I wasn't expecting such a great force. I know you probably have a good reason for not wanting to answer me, but I'll ask just one more time: What sort of beast gave you its will?"
Memories of my time with Sylvia ran through my mind. Mentally I replayed the scene where she had cautioned me never to tell anyone I had met her. But Virion was one of the only people I could trust, and he had the right to know. If it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't even be alive.
"Well, using her own words, it was what we would call a dragon."
A thick silence filled the room, and Virion's face seemed frozen into a stricken expression. At last he began mumbling to himself, the only words I could make out being 'possible' and 'never happened.'
"Dragon…" he finally managed to wheeze, his eyes staring blankly at me. "Dear lord… a dragon tamer. In all my life, I never thought I'd live to see the birth of a dragon tamer… And I… I'm even the one who *trained* him!" He was becoming more animated by the second, and now he burst into wild laughter, shouting, "*A dragon tamer!*"
His shouts and whoops woke Tess up, and she stared at him, confused.
He suddenly sobered, then grabbed both my shoulders and looked at me intently. "You did right in keeping this a secret. *Do not tell anyone else.* This power of yours must be kept a secret until you have the strength to protect yourself and those around you."
"I'm beginning to believe that more and more, Gramps," I responded seriously.

"Good. Although I would like to know the whole story, I am more than satisfied with what you've told me for now." He beamed at me.
"What is it, Gramps? What did Art tell you? That's not fair, keeping secrets from me." Tess was beginning to pout.
"You'll know when the time is right, little one. Now, Arthur! I have good news. The teleportation gate wasn't supposed to open for another two years, but it will be opening early. There will be a tournament in the city of Xyrus four months from now. It's a very important event for the future, because both the dwarves and elves are sending youths—both as representatives for the tournament and as preliminary students to your human academy. With the hubbub of the tournament, we can sneak you back into Sapin without the humans knowing," Virion said with a smile on his sharp face.
"Really, Gramps? I can go home soon?" I shot out of bed.
I would finally be able to see my parents again! I had been sending messages to my parents every once in a while through Elder Rinia, but hadn't been able to see them again using the water divination technique, which was very taxing for the ancient diviner.
"Y-you're leaving soon, Art?" Tessia asked, crestfallen.
"Yeah. I have to go back to my family soon. Don't worry though—I'll visit you again! And maybe you can come visit me in Sapin," I said, hoping to cheer her up.
"We still have four months, Arthur," Gramps said. "Until the day the teleportation gates open, I expect you to train harder than ever, brat. Your mana core hasn't developed at all these past three years because of the assimilation you had to do. Don't focus on training your beast's will—that should only be used as a trump card. Understood?"
He was right. Though I had yet to activate even the acquire phase of my dragon will, I knew that using it would only bring unwanted attention. I should avoid using my beast's will, if possible.
Grandpa slapped my back and said, "Now! Take a bath and rest some more.

You reek of something rotten. Little one, let's leave Arthur alone so he can recuperate."

Tess still looked depressed at the sudden news of my leaving. Living with her for the past three years had given us a bond as close as any siblings. More than that, although she was only nine years old, she was already showing signs of blossoming into a beautiful woman, and I did feel a twinge of regret that I wouldn't be here with her as she grew up.

"Tess, cheer up, okay? I'll still be around for a few more months—and even after I leave, it's not going to be permanent. I'd like for you to someday come and meet my parents too." I gave her a sincere hug.

"What are you doing?" she squealed with flushed cheeks as she pushed me away and ran out of the room.

"Ah, youth! Sleep well, Arthur," Gramps chuckled, shaking his head as he closed the door behind him.

Was Tess going through puberty already?

I hopped back into bed, feeling too lazy to start my day just yet.

"I'll just lie down for a little while first, then take a shower," I muttered aloud.

I was distracted by a rustling sound. At first I thought it must be the wind, but then I realized I didn't usually hear the rustling of leaves in my room. Just when I was about to put the sound out of my mind—

crack

I sat up and looked around, trying to locate where the sound was coming from. More crackling noises filled the room.

I turned my gaze toward my robe, which was lying on the chair.

"Kyu, kyu!"

Kyu? My robe was making 'kyu' sounds? My brow furrowed as I tried to assess what was going on.

There was another, sharper cracking sound, and I tensed.

"Kyu!"

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The stone!

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16

COMPANION

I JUMPED out of my bed and carefully rummaged through my robe to locate the gem Sylvia had entrusted me with.

My breath caught in my chest as I fell back onto my butt, staring at what used to be the rainbow-colored gem. "Holy shit."

"Kyu!"

The stone wasn't a gem.

It was an egg!

And what used to be an egg was now something I couldn't put into words.

The first thought that came to mind was, *It's a dragon*. And it did look somewhat like a dragon to me, but at the same time, it didn't. It was all black. It reminded me of a kitten with scales.

The sclera, which in a human's eyes would usually be white, was black—like Grandpa Virion when he was in his second form—but the irises were a bright red instead of yellow. The pupils were sharp slits; they should have looked menacing, but in the body of something akin to a small feline, it was just adorable.

The most noticeable difference between a dragon like Sylvia and this little… thing was that it had two horns on its head, identical to the illusion Sylvia had cast around herself before revealing her dragon form to me. They curved outward around its head, then came to a sharp point in the front. Its head was shaped like a cat's, but the snout was a just a little bit more pointed.

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The tail, though, looked exactly like Sylvia's tail: reptilian, with two red spikes at the end. Along the hatchling's spine were small red spikes—the same shade of red as its eyes. It didn't have wings; where the wings would normally be located were, instead, two small bumps. I could see that its belly didn't have scales, although it looked sort of leathery.

It sat on all fours with its head tilted to one side while each of us studied the other. Then the newly hatched creature let out a toothless yawn, lost its balance, and toppled over onto its back.

I felt an overwhelming urge to embrace this creature.

"Kyu?" Its sharp eyes locked on mine, and seemed to show an intelligence that didn't match its appearance.

"Hi there, little fella. I'm Arthur." I stretched my hand out toward it as if it were a dog that needed to know my scent.

"Kyu!" It jumped off the chair and onto my lap, gazing up at me.

I could feel my hands twitch as I suppressed the urge to squeeze it. It lacked Sylvia's majesty and fearsomeness, but this creature was dangerous in a different sense.

Unable to resist, I carefully petted the adorable menace. The scales were surprisingly soft, and the red spikes that ran down its back felt like rubber. It seemed all young animals, whether humans or monsters, were squishy and soft. Closing its eyes, it started purring.

I could feel my tension melt away, and I let out a soft laugh.

It rolled onto its back, asking for a more thorough rub. The belly felt like very soft, smooth leather. I took a closer look at its claws and was interested to see that they looked more like paws than actual claws. Its only hard feature was its horns, which were surprisingly sharp as well—rather like the egg tooth a chick would use to crack itself out of its shell.

"Aren't you just a cute li'l fella?" My smile widened as I stroked this adorable newborn, and I felt almost intoxicated.

Eventually I began to wonder what to name it—which was when I realized I

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didn't even know the gender of this mysterious creature.
The newborn shot its tongue out and licked the underside of my left forearm. I yelped and reflexively pulled my arm back from the scorching sensation, but a glowing black light had begun to envelop my arm.
The prickling pain subsided almost immediately, so I relaxed and waited. After a moment, the creature pulled its tongue back, revealing a black marking on my forearm.
It closely resembled the tribal markings that had covered Sylvia before she passed her will on to me, but this pattern was that of a wing—just one open wing—made up of several dashes and sharp, branching curves. It looked intricate and mysterious.
Only eight, but I already have a tattoo. I'm such a rebel.
'Mama?'
The creature was looking up at me, its mouth closed. But I'd definitely heard a voice just then.
'Mama?' This time I heard it clearly in my head.
Was this… telepathy?
Shaking my head helplessly, I responded aloud, saying, "I guess I'm your mother. But I'm a boy, so you should call me papa."
'Papa!' It jumped up and licked my nose.
I'm a rebel with a tattoo and *a child.*
Some sort of telepathic connection had been established between us when the mark had appeared on my forearm. I spent a few minutes trying to communicate with the creature, but it felt more like a guessing game. The voice I heard in my head sounded like a girl's, so I decided to name the creature Sylvie, after her real mother.
'Seevy?' she responded with her head tilted.
Picking her up and bringing her close to my face, I smiled at her. "That's right! Your name is Sylvie."
She nuzzled her nose to mine, closing her narrow eyes.

Sylvie was remarkably intelligent for a newborn; she already seemed to have the mental capacity of a toddler. Our telepathic communication didn't take place in any language I recognized—I just understood what she wanted me to know. It was a very odd feeling, not knowing what words she was saying yet knowing what she meant. Aside from simple words like "papa," most of her communication came through as emotions. I was able to get the gist of what she meant by how she felt.

"Okay, Sylvie, I need to wash now. Do you want to come with me?"

"Kyu?" She tilted her head again while she looked up at me. She seemed to be asking me what 'wash' was, so I just laughed and took her with me.

When I stepped under the shower, she seemed to be crying 'nooooo' as she wailed a shrill "Kyuu!"

"I guess you don't like water that much, do you, Sylvie?" I chuckled, setting her down in a dry area.

Sylvia shook herself off like a wet dog, wandered around for a few moments, then plopped herself down on the floor next to the shower, her tail wagging. She sat there, patiently observing me, as I finished washing up.

She exhibited behaviors of both a dog and a cat. Never would I have imagined her lineage to be that of a mighty dragon—assuming, of course, that she was actually Sylvia's child.

That got me thinking, though.

Was this tiny creature really a dragon? She sure looked like a baby dragon… but why was she completely black when Sylvia's true form had been pure white? What baffled me most were Sylvie's horns, which were eerily similar to those of the demon-king illusion Sylvia had assumed at first—and also to the demon who had confronted her.

I got out of the shower and dried myself off. It was no use thinking about all this now. The important question was: How was I going to explain this to Gramps and Tess?

I left the bathroom, Sylvie toddling behind me and 'kyu'ing for me not to

leave her behind.

I gathered up the pieces of the shell Sylvie had hatched from and set it aside. Then I took the feather that had encased the stone and wrapped it around my forearm to cover the mark little Sylvie had left.

My mind drifted back to Gramps' news. *Four months.* In four months, I would be reunited with my parents. I wondered if they would recognize me.

Sylvie must have felt my sense of longing as I thought about my parents, because she cuddled in close to my face and licked my cheeks.

"Thanks, little Sylv." Petting her horned head, I fell asleep.

The sound of a shrill scream pierced through my ears, jolting me awake.

"What is it? What happened? Who's there?" I jumped to a standing position on my bed, using my pillow as a makeshift sword, bed hair ablaze.

"Oh my gosh! What is this? It's so *cute*!"

The noise seemed to be coming from Tess, who was tightly grasping the squirming Sylvie in her arms.

'Papa, help!'

Letting out a defeated breath, I fell back into bed. *Come back, my beautiful sleep…*

"Her name is Sylvie and she just hatched from her shell yesterday. You should let go of her, though. I don't think she likes being strangled." My words were muffled by the pillow covering my head.

It's too early in the morning.

Sylvie had finally freed herself from Tessia's grasp and was hiding behind me, glaring at Tess. She let out a high-pitched growl.

"Don't worry, Sylv, she's a friend," I said, petting her head and giving up my hopes of being able to go back to sleep.

"She's adorable!" Tess exclaimed, staring at my cautious hatchling with her mouth agape. I could practically see hearts come out of her eyes as she inched herself closer to us, her hands twitching like a predator's.

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"Okay, now you just look scary, Tess. Get out of my room so I can change," I instructed, pushing the enthralled princess out the door.

I dressed in a loose robe and pants. As I was putting on my shoes, Sylvie jumped onto my head and nestled into my hair, hitching herself a ride.

"Kyu!" She sure sounded happy.

I walked downstairs, saying good morning to the shocked and confused maids, who couldn't take their eyes off the top of my head. They all ended up having the same reaction as Tess, though, and I had to pick up my pace as I began to fear for our safety.

"Gramps! We're here!" I shouted.

Grandpa Virion was sipping tea as he read a book. Turning his head at my entrance, he smiled. "Ah! Here you are, Art! Tessia just left. Why was she fussing about some sort of pet that…"

His voice trailed off, and his cup dangled limply in his hand when he noticed the horned black lump sitting on my head.

"T-that's…" He stuttered and spluttered before finally managing to ask, "What is that?" His eyes never left the top of my head.

"Er… I think she's something like a dragon, although I'm not entirely sure myself."

"Kyu?" I could sense Sylvie's caution about Virion through our mental link.

Hearing that I had arrived, Tess burst through the door into the courtyard, practically bouncing up and down.

"It's a dragon? But it's so cute! Art, can I hold her? Can I? Can I?" she begged, eyes sparkling.

Sylvie began growling and hissing at Tessia as if they were mortal enemies, and her claws stabbed into my scalp.

"Ow! *Ouch!* Sylvie, your claws!" I tried peeling her off my head, but she wouldn't budge.

Grandpa Virion—still half-dazed, trying to make sense out of the creature on my head—finally spoke up. "If that really is a dragon… How did you come

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across an egg? How did you get it to hatch?"

"The dragon who gave me her will entrusted me with a stone. I thought it was just a keepsake, or at most maybe a valuable gem. I didn't know what it actually was until it hatched. What do you mean by 'get it to hatch'?" I was confused now as well.

"Dragons' eggs—assuming that really is a dragon—require more than just the passage of time to hatch," he explained. "It is said that the dragon inside must sense that something capable of protecting and loving it is close by before it will hatch. Even then, there must be a very close bond between them."

I tried to think what might have triggered the hatching, and almost immediately came to a conclusion.

"Activating the will, Gramps!" I exclaimed. "I think that's what made her come out!"

He scratched his chin, nodding slowly. "That is a viable explanation. The draconic races haven't been seen for hundreds of years, and we have very few records of them, so I can't say for sure—but there's no use thinking about it now. Just be sure to keep the hatchling close by at all times. It does look very much like one of the draconic races, but I am one of the few who would be able to make that connection. Most people wouldn't know that creature was a dragon, so you should be fine if you pass it off as a sort of rare mana beast."

With that settled, I placed Sylv on the ground beside me and prepared for the morning's training. For the next four months, my training would consist of learning to utilize the power of Sylvia's will, as well as condensing my mana core into the next stages.

"Accessing the first phase is simple, yet may take a lifetime if comprehension of your beast's will does not come naturally. While your mana core is only dark red, your body right now should already be beyond that of a dark orange stage mage. Since the ceremony, you should be able to feel a small area

inside your mana core which holds the will. It's best to reach the acquire stage through your own learning, not by being taught. In my experience, the best way to trigger your beast will is through continuous combat."

"Makes sense to me," I replied, already stretching my body.

"Good!" he said, with a confident smirk on his face. "Let's fight."

The days went by quickly, as I was completely immersed in training. I was able to access my first phase, but I wouldn't be able to use it in an actual fight until I gained more control over it. Virion also taught me how to conceal my beast will so other mages wouldn't detect it. After the assimilation, my mana cultivation grew by leaps and bounds.

Sylvie didn't seem to change much as the weeks went by, other than becoming even more intelligent. Her vocabulary was still limited, but it was much easier for us to understand each other. I spent a lot of time with Tess—she dragged me out with her every free moment we had, trying to make as many memories as possible before I left. We went to holiday festivals, visited Tess's favorite shops, and took part in other everyday activities of elven life, meeting scores of people at every event.

Then, just like that, the four months, once so far away, had passed.

Dressed in a simple olive-green long-sleeve tunic and black pants, with the feather wrapped around my forearm, I came out of my room. Grandpa Virion and Tessia were waiting for me outside.

"Arthur, take care," he said. "We'll find some way to contact you and stay in touch." He handed me a small oval compass made of silver. "Take this with you so you can navigate through the Forest of Elshire if you're ever in the area. Or maybe you can just find another princess to lead you back," he said with a wink.

"Grandpa!" Tessia yelled, smacking her grandfather.

"Ouch! It was a joke, little one!" Grandpa Virion yelped while rubbing his side.

"As the heads of state, Alduin and Merial will be attending the tournament,

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but Tess and I won't be going. This will be the last time we'll see each other for a while. Until next time, Arthur!" He grabbed me in a strong hug, almost knocking Sylvie off my head.

"I'll miss you, Art," Tess sniffled, tears lining her eyes. "Be sure to come visit again! Don't go chasing after human girls, okay? Promise me, okay?"

I hugged my dear friend and patted her head, which was awkward since she was still taller than I was. "We'll see each other again soon. And you'd better be stronger than me the next time we meet, Tess! With Gramps teaching you, you'll have no excuse."

She gave me a feeble nod, either unable or unwilling to speak past the sniffling.

I waved goodbye, then followed behind Merial and Alduin, who each gave me a sympathetic smile. I hadn't really spent much time with the king and queen, but we were comfortable with each other, and I hoped that, next time I visited, I would be able to develop a closer relationship with them.

I got into the carriage with the elf representatives, while the king and queen were escorted into a separate carriage.

"Well, look who it is!" An elf boy wearing a highly decorated purple robe smirked at me. "If it isn't the human thug. Did the royal family finally kick you out of the kingdom?"

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" I felt like I should know this elf, but I couldn't quite put my finger on where we might have met. Meanwhile, Sylvie was growling, pointing her horns in his direction.

He bolted up angrily, pointing an accusing finger at me. "I'm the noble you mercilessly attacked in defiance of the customs of the duel!"

It suddenly clicked. "You're the bug I sent tumbling!" I yelled in realization —a bit louder than I had meant to.

"You *dare*…?" His face turned bright pink and his ears twitched profusely in anger. A few elves behind him desperately tried to cover their snickering.

"You may have gotten away with cheating when we were children, but were

we to duel again, I would win easily."

"Ah—sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I can't recall your name, though." I extended my hand.

Face still red, trying to preserve what little dignity he had left, he rejected my handshake and declared pompously, "I am Feyrith Ivsaar III, descendant of the noble Ivsaar family."

A young elf girl—perhaps a few years older than Feyrith—piped up, saying, "You can just call him Feyfey like we do."

"Don't tell him that!" Face turning an even darker shade of red, Feyfey turned his head away and took a seat.

I sat down next to Feyfey and gave him a sympathetic pat, and he responded by angrily smacking my hand away.

Our carriage went through the teleportation gate with the now-familiar sensation of the world being pulled away from us.

"We have arrived in Xyrus," the driver announced.

Taking a quick peek out, I saw a throng of people surrounding us, all politely clapping at our entrance. This tournament was intended to improve the difficult relationship between humans and elves throughout the continent. It wasn't just about gathering gifted youths of all species together, but also building a future where they could learn under one roof. It was an exciting venture the nations' leaders were embarking on and would hopefully be a turning point in interspecies relations, but it was also an intimidating move which would, no doubt, be filled with disputes and hostility.

After passing through the crowd, the driver pulled the carriage up to a small gap between two buildings and signaled to me that this would be the best time for me to leave without being noticed.

I say goodbye to Feyfey and the rest of the representatives and wished them luck. Feyfey merely whipped his head away, but he also gave me a slight wave. Jumping down from the carriage, Sylvie still perched on my head, I made my way through the alleyway and tried to remember what my parents'

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home had looked like.

After an hour of wandering around, I finally managed to find the huge manor where they were supposed to be residing.

"We're home. Sylv. We're finally home," I muttered shakily under my breath.

"Kyu?" she said, as if to say, 'I thought we were at home before.'

I dusted off my shirt and pants, walked carefully up the flight of stairs, and took one deep breath. Then I knocked on the giant double doors.

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17

FAMILY

It was a strange feeling—I was more nervous now, seeing my family again, than when I had first been appointed a king amidst the most powerful people in the world.

"Whew. Let's do this, Sylvie."

"Kyu," she responded, my excitement spreading to her.

The dull clang of metal on metal rang surprisingly loudly.

I could hear faint pitter-patter sounds followed by a childish voice. "Coming!"

A maid opened the door, with a little girl standing next to her. Immediately upon seeing me, the child hid behind the maid.

The maid looked at me curiously, evidently surprised to see an eight-year-old knocking at the door of a noble's estate.

I cleared my throat. "Hello. My name is Arthur Leywin. I believe my family is currently residing in this manor. May I speak to them?" I gave a slight bow, Sylvie rocking on my head.

Before the confused maid could even respond, I heard an all-too-familiar voice in the background.

"Eleanor Leywin! There you are! You have got to stop running to the front door every time someone…"

Upon seeing me, my mother stopped in mid-sentence and dropped a small bowl of what looked like food for… *my sister?*

I looked down at the girl whose dazzling brown eyes gazed at me with innocent curiosity. Her shimmering ash brown hair was tied into pigtails on each side of her head, just above her ears. It was much prettier than Father's hair, but I knew who she had inherited the color from.

I struggled to tear my eyes away from my little sister and turned to face my mother. My vision going blurry from the tears that filled my eyes, I said the one thing I knew she was waiting to hear.

"Hi, Mom. I'm home." I gave a small, awkward wave, not knowing what I would do if she didn't recognize me.

But my fears were unfounded. She raced toward me at a speed that seemed even faster than Grandpa Virion's, but that might have just been because of my blurry vision.

"Oh, my baby! *Arthur!*" She arrived in front of me and collapsed to her knees, her arms around my waist. She gripped me with all her strength, as if afraid that I might disappear again if she let go.

"You're alive! The voice… I *knew* it was you! You're back now! Yes, you're home now. Arthur, my baby!" Her sniffles became sputters, then she broke into sobs.

I couldn't even manage a complete sentence; I kept my lips tightly shut to hold back my own sobs.

With my head buried in my mother's shoulder, I thought, *You can be an all-powerful, immortal tyrant, but in front of your loved ones, the ability to control your emotions eludes you.*

I kept repeating in half-gurgled exclamations that I was alive, that I was home, that I wasn't leaving. My mother was a flurry of emotions. She was ecstatic that I was alive and home; she was mad that I hadn't come back sooner; she was sad at the thought of how long I'd been away from them and how hard it must have been for me—all at the same time.

Eleanor had joined us and was patting Mother's back. "Mama. There, there. Don't cry." When her attempts at comforting our mother were unsuccessful,

Eleanor began crying right along with us.

"Arthur!"

I turned my head, my face still wet with tears, and saw the sprinting, sweat-drenched figure of my father. The maid must have told him I had returned.

He didn't stop until he reached us, and then he simply slid on his knees, hugging us all until we nearly toppled over.

"Arthur! My son! Look how big you are. Oh my God! You're back, you're back!" My father was cupping my head in his hands to get a better look at my face. Then he broke down, placing his large hand on the back of my head and bringing my forehead to touch his.

It must have been quite a scene: my mother sobbing uncontrollably, embracing me; my oblivious little sister crying with her; my father and I just looking at each other with tears in our eyes—all of us indescribably glad that we were finally together.

Eventually, we all managed to settle down. My mother pulled me to sit next to her on the couch, Eleanor on her lap. Father took a seat in a chair he had pulled up, facing me, his elbows on his knee as he leaned forward. Mother was holding my hands as if afraid to let go, and the tears welled up anew every time she looked at my face.

"Are you all right? Did you get three meals a day? You slept well and dressed warmly every day, right? Oh, my baby. Look how big you are now." Tears escaped her eyes as she smiled at me. She stroked my hair and planted a soft kiss on the crown of my head. "Thank God you're back. I'm so happy," she whispered, her voice still trembling.

Eleanor, calmer now, was watching Sylvie and me curiously; the baby dragon was sitting next to me, attentively observing the three unfamiliar humans.

My father kept looking at Sylvie with a strange expression, but he didn't mention her. His gaze would return to me, and his eyes would soften. He kept shaking his head, repeating how big I was now. It must have been a fulfilling yet miserable feeling for him, as a parent, to see how big his son had gotten

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but know he hadn't been there with me to witness it.
"Ellie, say hi to your big brother. He was away for a while, but he'll live with us from now on. Come on, say hello," my mother gently urged my sister.
"Bruh-der?" She tilted her head, reminding me of a confused Sylvie.
She cupped her hands over my mother's ear and whispered something.
"Yes," my mother laughed, "that big brother. The one I always told stories about. He's the one."
My sister's eyes were sparkling as she looked at me. I couldn't help but wonder what stories Mother had told her.
"Hi, bruhder!" she said, beaming, and waved both of her little hands at me.
"Hello, Eleanor. It's nice to meet you… sister." I laughed and patted her head.
Father spoke up now. "Arthur, we were devastated after… that incident—we could barely believe it when you contacted us that first time. Tell me, how did you survive the fall?"
It took a while for me to explain everything from the beginning, and I withheld some information that I thought it best not to tell them just yet. I explained that I had subconsciously wrapped myself in a protective layer of mana and was lucky enough to hit a bunch of branches on the cliff before landing in a stream. I told them about meeting Tess and how she had been kidnapped; how, after I had rescued her, she'd led me to her kingdom and how I had been welcomed there.
"You said something about an illness that kept you from coming back sooner. What was that about? Are you well now?" my mother asked anxiously.
Shaking my head, I explained, "You don't need to worry about that. I guess there was some sort of instability in my mana core that gave me episodes of pain. It was really bad at first, but luckily there was an elder who knew how to cure it. It was a slow process, but he assured me it wasn't life-threatening, if treated properly."
Relief replaced her prior worried look, and she silently patted my head again.

"So what's the story with this little friend of yours?" my dad asked with a chuckle, looking at Sylvie.
"While I was travelling, I stumbled into a mana beast's den. She was badly injured, and she died shortly after I arrived. She seemed to have been guarding something, so I picked it up, thinking it might be something valuable. I didn't know it at the time, but it was an egg. The egg hatched only a couple of months ago so she's still a baby. Say hi to Sylvie."
I picked her up, her limbs dangling like a kitten's in my hands.
"Kyu!" she purred, as if greeting everyone.
I wasn't telling my family the whole truth, of course, but I had already promised myself I would tell them everything only after I was older and more capable.
I then asked them to update me on everything that had happened after we had been separated. The only thing I knew—which I had seen through the water divination—was that they lived here in Xyrus, but nothing more, and I was exceptionally curious.
Father summarized the events of their last few years, and then my mother chimed in. "That's right! The Helstea family is away on a trip, but they should be returning today. They're going to be so surprised when they see you, Art!"
I turned to face my mother. She hadn't changed much since I'd last seen her, though she had lost a bit of weight and was slightly paler in complexion. My heart ached for her; I knew this was a result of the stress and depression of losing me. Father, however, seemed to be in much better shape now than he had been, probably as a result of his work as an instructor for the Helstea Auction House guards. His new physique, coupled with his beard, made him look much more rustic than he had before.
"Dad. What color is your mana core now?" I asked as Sylvie resumed her place on the top of my head, tail swishing in contentment.
A confident grin spread across my father's face, and he proudly replied,

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"Your old man broke through the light red stage a few years back. I'm a dark orange mage now."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. In his early thirties, my father was doing pretty well for himself. The average mage who didn't attend school usually stagnated at the red stage—perhaps light red if they were lucky. Of course, it was different for the elites, who had a much purer lineage and access to better resources, but for a standard mage, my father was doing very well indeed.

He then leaned closer and said, "I bet you only asked me that so you could brag yourself. Let's hear it: What stage are you at now?"

Scratching my cheek, I mumbled, "Light red."

My father had already been leaning forward in his chair, but upon hearing that, he jerked in surprise and tumbled completely out of it. Even my mother let out a gasp of surprise.

"Holy shit!" my father exclaimed.

"Shet!" Eleanor echoed, laughing at my father falling.

"Honey! What did I say about cursing in front of Ellie?" my mother reprimanded him, blocking my sister's ears.

"Sorry. Sorry! Ellie, don't listen to what your papa just said." He then turned back to me.

"My son—still the same genius he always was. Come on. Have a quick spar with your old man." My father grinned menacingly and clasped my shoulders.

"Dear! He just got home. Let him rest." Mother pulled me back.

"It's fine, Mom." I gently placed my hand on top of hers, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Men! Always trying to fight. Isn't that right, Ellie?" My mother shook her head helplessly.

"Papa and bruhder are men!" echoed Ellie, trying to mimic our mother's expression, and Father and I both laughed this time.

It was good to be back.

We had just stood up to move to the backyard when I heard the door open.
"Rey! I just heard your son was alive. What the hell is going on?" A thin, proper man with glasses and neatly parted hair was standing there, sweating in his suit, his wife and daughter—or so I assumed—running in behind him.
"Vincent, everyone! I would like you to meet my son, Arthur. He's back, Vince!"
My father wrapped his arm around the man's shoulder.
"Arthur, this is Vincent Helstea, an old friend and the person I now work for. This is his house, so introduce yourself before we start wrecking it," he added, grinning broadly.
Bowing to a ninety-degree angle, I introduced myself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Helstea. I am Arthur Leywin. I'm not sure what my family has told you about me, but they didn't know I had survived the incident back then. Thank you for taking care of them all this time." This man had sheltered my family during their toughest time. As far as I was concerned, I owed him and his family dearly.
"It's really no problem," he said with a slight stutter. "I'm just glad that you're alive and safe." He adjusted his glasses as if to make sure he was really speaking to an eight-year-old. "Meet my wife, Tabitha, and my daughter, Lilia," he continued, pushing them forward.
"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am, Lilia." I bowed again, and Sylvie introduced herself, too, with a "Kyu!"
Tabitha gave a kind smile in response. "It's lovely to have you in our home, Arthur. Say hi, Lilia! Arthur is your age so don't be shy."
The little girl, Lilia, spoke up, pointing hesitantly at the creature on my head. "What's that? It's so cute."
"This is an infant mana beast that I'm bonded with. Her name is Sylvie. Sylvie, get down and say hello."
Sylvie leaped off my head and mewed at Lilia.
"Oh my gosh!" Lilia squealed.

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"Rey, what did you mean by 'wrecking my house'?" Vincent asked, finally tearing his eyes away from Sylvie.
"We were just on our way out to the backyard. Arthur and I are going to do a little sparring. Want to come?" He chuckled.
Vincent sputtered incredulously. "What? Are you serious? Your son just returned from the dead and you want to fight him? Besides, Arthur can't be older than eight. Why would you want to spar with him?"
"Don't let my son's age fool you. He's already a light-red-stage augmenter," my father harrumphed proudly, puffing his chest.
Vincent just shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous, Rey. Your eight-year-old has already awakened *and* gotten past three stages? Even the snobby genius brats who get admitted into Xyrus Academy are barely at the dark red stage, and that's when they're eleven or twelve."
My father laughed louder in response. With an arm around Vincent's shoulder, he ushered us all to the backyard, saying only, "You'll see. Besides, I have a little surprise as well."
On the large grass lot outside, I set Sylvie down off to one side of the audience, which consisted of my mother and sister and the Helstea family. Then my father and I put proper distance between ourselves.
"Ready when you are," I smiled.
"Be careful, Art. You may be light red, but your old man is still at a higher stage than you." My father pounded his fists together, giving me a confident smirk.
I glanced at Vincent, who was still shaking his head in disbelief.
"Come on," my father taunted, assuming an offensive stance.
It was time to see how all my training with Grandpa Virion would pay off.
One of the mysteries about mana formed inside the core during the earliest stages was that it differed depending on how augmenters and conjurers used it.
Although it was expensive, many parents chose to have their newly-

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awakened child tested with a special device to see what element they were most adept with. A conjurer's attribute became evident based on what type of elements they had an easier time casting.

For augmenters, however, it was much less obvious, because most of their attacks focused on using mana to enhance their bodies. However, even augmenters displayed differences in how adept they were with certain types of elements. One quick example was gathering mana into a single point and releasing it in an explosive attack. Although no actual flames were involved, an augmenter who easily utilized mana in that manner would typically be considered a fire-attribute mage.

But that only applied in the beginning.

It varied from person to person, but after meeting a certain threshold in one's mana core and comprehension of the element, the user could utilize mana in a way that actually pertained to their attribute. For conjurers, this meant they could start slowly progressing away from the training wheels of chanting and start shortening their verses—or even completely forgoing it for the element they were most adept at.

For augmenters, it would become much more noticeable because they could begin actually manifesting their elemental attribute instead of simply manipulating mana in a manner corresponding to their elemental attribute.

For example, before breaking through, a fire-attribute augmenter's attack would simply carry a more powerful explosive burst, while wind-attribute augmenters would find it easier to manipulate mana into faster and sharper attacks.

However, with sufficient comprehension, the augmenter's element attribute would actually influence their attacks physically. Earth-attribute augmenters could learn to produce a gauntlet of earth or even create small seismic shocks by stomping their foot, while wind-attribute augmenters could be taught to release small blades of wind or create a vacuum effect in their punches, and so on. These were all techniques a mage could utilize upon sufficient

comprehension of his or her respective element.
Of course, conjurers still had a major advantage, being able to influence more of their surroundings. Their range was also greater, but their weakness was still their vulnerability in the process of chanting, as well as the fact that their bodies weren't naturally protected by mana.
Because of these differences, mages who could break the threshold were much stronger than mages who couldn't, and this ultimately determined their talent and what accomplishments they could achieve.
While conjurers could innately control elements because of their proficiency at absorbing nature's mana with their mana veins, augmenters were different. For every single-attribute augmenter, there were ten who weren't. There were cases of attribute augmenters who never broke the threshold to become fully-fledged elemental attribute augmenters. This was where proper schooling came into play; with enough guidance from an early age, a mage would be more able to gain comprehension of their elemental attribute.
My body, already strengthened through assimilation, now responded to mana much more readily than it had before. Before my father had time to prepare, I was within punching range of his body.
Even my hearing was more sensitive now, and I could hear Vincent murmur, "What in the…" as well as gasps from the others.
My father responded immediately, and I could sense mana spreading throughout his body.
Feigning a punch, I twisted my torso and went for a high kick, but was promptly blocked by my father's left arm.
He clearly hadn't expected my kick to be as powerful as it was. His arm was flung back by the blow, opening his guard. But before I was able to make use of that opening, he used the momentum to chop at my body with his right hand.
It was obvious that I was now in a disadvantaged position, but my full previous lifetime of fighting had already prepared me for countering him.

I took his chop with my left forearm and right palm to soften the blow—and also to create enough space for me to slip inside.

I didn't have enough leverage to shoulder-toss him, so instead I grabbed his right arm and kicked at the back of his right knee.

Losing his balance, he fell forward as I used my mana-imbued body to throw him. Unfortunately, he regained his balance more quickly than I had expected, and I had no choice but to put some distance between us before he got a hold of me.

"I'd have to say you're better than all the mages I've trained. Your old man's going to get serious now, though! Be careful," Father grunted, his face a mask of intense concentration. It was obvious to both of us that we had each been holding back.

My father's fists ignited, bursting into fiery scarlet gloves. His control over the fire element was at the novice level, as evidenced by the steam coming from his shoulders and head. This meant that there was unnecessary mana spreading throughout his body.

I had learned early on that my father was a fire-attribute mage, but after reaching a bottleneck for years while he raised a family, he was able to reach the orange stage and, more impressively, was able to break through in his comprehension in fire. He could now be considered an official elemental augmenter, or elemental for short.

I shot him a proud grin, then readied myself as well.

"Impressive, Dad… but now it's my turn."

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18

PEACEFUL

In the world I had come from, elemental augmenters were practitioners of different sects. The Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind Sects each had their own techniques which utilized their element.

I had become king in my old world by knowing how to fight in all four practices. If that ability were to translate to this world, I'd be a sort of quadra-elemental mage, if such a thing existed. I did have my preferences, of course; my weakest elements were earth and wind, and my strongest were fire and water. I barely used wind, and used earth only for slight support. No, I had been feared in battle because of my mastery of the two opposing elements of water and fire.

When I had been training with Gramps, I'd tested out numerous theories within my mind. One thing I had learned very quickly was that I had absolutely no talent for conjuring. Grandpa had brought over an elven conjurer one day after I'd asked him to get someone to teach me the basics, and I'd ended up nearly killing myself.

Augmenting and conjuring were very different in one sense, and very similar in another. An augmenter could potentially have the same ability as a conjurer, and vice versa. However, this only came with advanced breakthroughs in the top mana core stages as well as a much higher form of comprehension in the respective element. I'd thought maybe I could bypass that fundamental rule and become both a conjurer *and* an augmenter, but I'd

had to learn the hard way that it wasn't possible.

Another theory I had tested regarded my potential ability as a deviant. Grandpa Virion and Tess had both been shocked speechless to learn that I could manipulate all four elements, but after four months of trying to control any of the higher elements, I'd had only mixed results.

Before even taking the first step, a mage must understand the link between the basic elements and their higher forms. The mage's body must naturally understand this link and harmonize the structure of the mana. For wind and earth, even if I had been able to grasp the link between the basic and higher forms, my body wouldn't have been able to change the mana particles' structure. So, with regard to sound and gravity, I had yet to produce any favorable results.

Though I had finally broken through into the world of deviants with lightning and ice, I was still a beginner. My lightning-attribute magic needed a lot of work, since it was completely new to me. As for ice-attribute magic, that was even harder. Using either of them required an extraordinary amount of mana, most of which was wasted on inept utilization.

I was also bound by the strict limits on the duration of use of each type: lightning magic for about three minutes, and for ice, even less. For now, my use of lightning-attribute magic was more of a liability than an asset, as the mana I depleted using lightning would only drain resources better used with a stronger element. With enough practice, though, I knew I could control these deviant attributes.

Very few mages were able to transcend their basic element and master its higher form, because the higher form was completely different and incomparably more difficult. Of course, my being able to learn both lightning and ice within four months might seem to give this the lie, but it's important to remember that I had knowledge and understanding from my old world to help my transcendence along. I was still a complete beginner in these higher forms of elements, though—those old-world experiences hadn't prepared me

to actually utilize these deviant attributes.
Despite my relatively weak control over lightning, however, I still managed to surprise my father when I imbued my body with a protective layer of electrical energy, which arced away from my skin and shocked him when he attempted to grab me.

My father had always been the type to readily accept facts; he had already known I was some sort of genius, so realizing that I was also a deviant hadn't surprised him all that much. However, this was not the case for those in the audience. My sister seemed fascinated, but that was simply because she didn't really understand what had happened. She was probably used to seeing Father fight, so nothing about the fighting would have registered with her as being odd. Vincent and Tabitha's faces, however, were pale, wide-eyed mirrors of each other. My mother's hands were covering her mouth in shock, and even Lilia knew that what I had done wasn't normal.
Their reactions were more along the lines of what I had expected than my father's excited yet unquestioning acceptance.
With a weak laugh, I threw out my arms. "Surprise!"
"Kyu!" Sylvie scampered toward me, giving me a concerned gaze as if to ask, 'are you okay, papa?'
Vincent was the first to regain his voice. "D-deviant!" he managed to stammer.
Tabitha just sighed in astonishment. "My god…"
"So, Art, when did you learn that trick?" my father asked, his tone more curious than shocked or bewildered. He shook his head as he ruffled my hair.
"Not too long ago, Dad. I can barely control it, though," I replied sheepishly.
We made our way back inside and situated ourselves around the dining table.
"Rey… your son," Vincent said. "Do you realize the kind of future he has? He's only eight, but he's already stronger than a veteran B-class adventurer!"
He was barely able to contain his excitement.

My father scratched his head. "This is crazy. I thought him awakening at the age of three was terrifying enough, but who could have thought he would become a deviant as well?"
"What?" Tabitha cried, bolting up from her seat. "He awakened at the age of *three?*"
My mother just nodded at this. "And he managed to blow up most of our house in the process."
My father and Vincent both leaned back into their chairs, sighing in unison.
"Papa? Are you okay?" Eleanor poked Father in the cheek.
With a laugh, Father scooped her up. "Yes, I'm okay, princess."
Vincent rose from his chair and looked at us seriously, bracing his arms against the table.
"Rey, have you thought about enrolling your son in Xyrus Academy?"
"What? You can't be serious. He's only eight," my father said, sitting up in his chair.
Tabitha chimed in. "Rey, Alice, I think your son is more than capable of excelling at Xyrus."
"I thought only noble geniuses were allowed to attend Xyrus Academy," Mother responded, concern etched on her face.
Excited, Vincent said, "I can handle that! I do a lot of business with the director of the academy, and I'm sure she'll be lenient in the enrollment process."
"But the school fees are far too extravagant for us," Mother argued, still dubious.
"Alice, that should be the least of your worries. We will be glad to pay for the fees. Arthur's talent is immeasurable. Who knows what he can accomplish? Even if we couldn't pay, I'm sure he can find nobles who would beg to sponsor him." Tabitha held Mother's hands in her own for reassurance.
"May I have a say in this?" They seemed to have forgotten that the person whose future they were trying to decide was right there with them. "I've just

arrived back home today. Can I spend a bit of time with my family before I decide whether to go to school or not?" I gave Vincent a meaningful gaze.
"Of course. I apologize. I guess I got a bit excited there for a moment." He laughed weakly and sat back down.
"Thank you," I said, giving the Helstea family a smile. I was a little surprised at how readily the adults all accepted the fact that, although I was only eight years old, I spoke, thought, and behaved like an adult. The years spent away from my family had probably contributed to that. They were getting reacquainted with me almost as if I were a new person. My maturity was still remarkable, but it was probably easier for them to write off as being a result of the experiences they hadn't been present for. *That's going to be very convenient*, I thought.
I turned to look at my mother. "Mom, where do I sleep?"
"Oh, yes! You'll have your room next to Eleanor's, in the left wing. Come on, let's all go up now. It's getting late."
Sylvie had already fallen asleep on my head, and my baby sister had been nodding in and out of her dream world while we had been discussing my future.
Mother and Father led me to the room that was to be mine. It was much larger than my room in Ashber, but still decorated in a homey fashion. The sparse furnishings meant there was a lot of open space, but that was perfect since I needed space to train.
As I settled Sylvie down on the bed, Mother and Father sat down next to me.
"We'll go shopping tomorrow. We need to get you some clothes." My mother ran her fingers through my hair.
My father squatted down in front of me, grabbing my arm. "Arthur, whether you're a genius or not, you're still my son. I'll always be proud of you and love you—regardless of any other circumstances." His face was unusually serious. It was comforting to know they would always treat me as their son instead of their 'little genius."

I quietly nodded in return. I thought about revealing the full extent of my abilities, but decided it might be safer to do it in baby steps.

Before he stood up, my father pinched my cheek and gave me a sly smile. "Besides, I know you held back on me with your lightning magic today. Don't think you fooled me! We'll do a rematch soon."

My mother just chuckled at this. "I swear, all you ever think about is fighting." She looked at me with a comforting smile in her eyes. "Your father is right, though. No matter what kind of genius you are, you'll always be my baby boy."

I grinned back at her. "Can't I be your adolescent boy? I'm eight and a half now, Mom!"

"Nope! You can't," she retorted as they left my room. "Get some rest now. We'll go shopping with your sister tomorrow. It'll be a great chance for you to bond," she said, then closed the door behind her.

I didn't even have the energy to wash up. I just plopped into bed, jostling the slumbering Sylvie, who whined at me before going back to sleep.

It had been a long day. A good, long day.

With a smile plastered on my face, I followed Sylvie into a deep, comforting sleep.

I woke the next morning to my baby dragon licking furiously at my face.

"I'm up, Sylv, I'm up!"

"Kyu!" She was hopping up and down on top of me, a feeling of excitement radiating from her.

I thought of Tess. I never would have thought I'd miss being woken up by her uncouth methods. I wondered how she was doing. Tess had been my closest friend growing up, and though she had become a bit fierce, she was still the same kind-hearted girl who had worried about me and taken care of me while I was in Elenoir.

I took a quick shower, dragging my smelly dragon with me. She cried in

distress at the warm water drenching her, but I didn't relent. Before long, we were both sparkling clean.

"...kyu," Sylvie moaned, plopped down on my bed, exhausted from struggling.

"Don't complain. We were both filthy, and we didn't wash yesterday either."

There was a knock on my door, so I dressed quickly.

"Coming!" I said, my shirt still over my head.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by a shy Eleanor, looking down at her foot, which was rubbing at something on the ground.

"Well, hello there, Ellie." I squatted down so I was at her eye level, and gave her the gentlest smile I could muster.

"G'morning, brother." Her pronunciation was already improving; I wondered if she'd been practicing overnight. "Mama told me to wake you up," she muttered, her head still down.

"I see. Thank you very much, little sister," I said, patting her head. "Can you take me down to the kitchen?" I asked, holding out my hand.

"'Kay!" She nodded excitedly, then hesitated for a second before grabbing my hand and pulling me along.

Sylvie trotted along behind us, looking around at her new surroundings.

I was met with the pleasant smell of bacon as we entered the kitchen. Tabitha and my mother were chatting while they cooked. Lilia was seated at the table already, her legs swinging, obviously waiting for breakfast.

"Good morning, Mom, ma'am, Lilia," I announced.

"Kyu!" Sylvie echoed my greeting.

"Ah! I see Ellie managed to wake you up. I always had the hardest time waking you up, even when you were a baby, Art. I swear you slept like a log." My mother chuckled as she placed some eggs on a large plate.

"Did you sleep well?" Tabitha smiled at me as she handed me a side of fresh fruit.

"I slept great, Mrs. Helstea."

"Good morning, Arthur." Lilia's soft voice trailed off when she met my gaze, but I smiled and returned her greeting.

Breakfast was delicious. Mother mentioned that the maids were usually the ones to cook, but she had wanted to cook for me today. It had been too long since I'd had Mother's cooking, and I now realized how dearly I had missed it. I made sure to give some of my meat to Sylvie, who didn't hesitate to gobble whatever entered her mouth, including my finger. Ellie and Lilia both wanted a turn at feeding her, and I told them to go ahead. Needless to say, Sylvie warmed up to them both a bit more after getting food from them.

"The carriage is waiting out front—just leave the dishes in the sink and let's head out," announced Tabitha.

Xyrus was an amazing city. I stared, taking in all the different sights as we travelled down the main road. I could see magic shops, armories, spell-book stores, and even beast core shops! There was everything a mage could ask for. Adults and children alike were all dressed extravagantly, and luxurious carriages passed alongside ours. Some buildings were several stories high, making the city much bigger and denser than the podunk town of Ashber. There were children a few years older than me, all wearing similar uniforms —some black, others grey or red. Given their haughty demeanors, I could only assume they were students of Xyrus Academy. Uniforms in my old world had been meant to minimize discrimination by requiring students to dress alike regardless of their financial backgrounds, but here it seemed the uniforms were a sort of gold medallion for showing off to the rest of the world.

We eventually reached Xyrus's fashion district. It was here that I learned that shopping for clothes with women took an even greater toll on my body than training with Grandpa Virion had—and just the thought of his training regimen had left me in a cold sweat.

I was used as a mannequin for each of the women's personal style preferences. My mother wanted to dress me in simple clothes, while Tabitha

wanted to transform me into some sort of prince. Even Lilia and Ellie made me try on some clothes.

"You need to look good since you're my brother," Ellie announced loudly, hands on her hips.

Sylvie could feel the exhaustion radiating from me, and she perched comfortably on my head, as if to gloat.

I ended up with ten different sets of clothes, five from Mother and five from Tabitha. Mother and I both tried to prevent Tabitha from buying me anything but she scolded us, playfully saying, "Just think of it as an investment. Besides, I've always wanted a son."

After towing our bags of clothing to the carriage, we did some window-shopping. I was hoping to see the armory. I really wanted a decent sword with which to start practicing swordsmanship again, as it was clear that my skills had diminished after such a long break from proper training. The girls didn't want to go there, though, so I was forced to go to several gem stores instead. I would have to visit the armory with Father some other time.

We got home shortly before my father did, and by that time my physical and mental strength were depleted.

"How was your day, son?" he asked, taking a seat next to me at the dining table.

"I never thought shopping could be so exhausting," I groaned.

As if in response to my complaints, Vincent and Tabitha sat down across from us.

"I hear you got beat up by a bunch of women today, Arthur," Vincent teased.

I nodded feebly while Tabitha and Mother exchanged smirks. "This little prodigy of yours isn't quite as big a deal as I thought he was," she said, and Lilia and Ellie giggled.

"I will admit that nothing can top the endurance of a woman who's out shopping," I said wryly.

My father and Vincent laughed, nodding their heads in agreement. Our banter

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was interrupted by the sound of a doorbell, followed by knocking at the door.
"Ah! Looks like she's here," Vincent said, perking up and hurrying from the room.
The looks on everyone else's faces made it clear that Vincent was the only one who knew what was going on.
Vincent returned, leading an elderly woman into the dining room.
"Rey, Alice, Arthur—I know you said you wanted to put off the decision about school for later, but I just couldn't wait. Everyone, meet Cynthia Goodsky, the director of Xyrus Academy."
Noticing the slight twinge of annoyance on my face, Vincent immediately said, "Don't worry—I didn't bring her here to make you go to school right away. I just wanted her to meet you."
The director gave me a cryptic smile and held out her hand. "Nice to finally meet you, Arthur."

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19

PROCLAMATION

Xyrus Academy was hailed as the most exalted sanctuary for any of the would-be mages privileged enough to have both the background and talent to enter. There were several other academies scattered throughout the kingdom of Sapin, but the gap between those second-rate schools and Xyrus was insurmountable.

Xyrus Academy was a titan. Those who graduated from this academy were guaranteed a prosperous future and life. It was rumored that the top graduates could even become respected guards, instructors, or military leaders for the king himself. Of course, some chose the humbler route and focused on research, joining one of the mage guilds. However, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that students of Xyrus Academy were hailed as the true elites, even among nobles.

Now, here I was, standing in front of the academy's director. Normally, any eight-year-old—hell, *anyone*—would be ecstatic to be in the presence of someone so influential, but I couldn't hold back my expression of annoyance at the unexpected guest.

She was a very tall woman, and she held herself in an upright, poised manner that made her seem even taller. She wore a simple yet elegant robe of navy blue, laced with gold threading, and a pointed conjurer's hat—an accessory that amplified the absorption rate of the surrounding mana and, at times, provided additional benefits. Strapped to the side of her robe was a crystalline

white wand with a fluorescent gem attached. Even my ignorant eyes could see that this wand was extremely valuable. Her aura lent her a fey quality; her facial features were very soft, reminding me more of a friendly grandmother next door than an all-important figure of power. The crow's feet etched on the outer corners of her brown eyes only served to amplify the attractiveness of her smile when she introduced herself.

She stood there, hand extended, waiting for my response.

What was I supposed to do in this situation? Was I supposed to shake her hand, or would someone of her rank expect me to kiss it?

I took the safe route and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you too, Director."

The director seemed taken aback.

"Arthur! You're being rude. I'm so sorry for my son, Director Goodsky. He has just returned home and hasn't learned about formal customs." My mother pushed my head down with her hand, lowered herself to one knee, and bowed as she shook the director's hand. I mimicked her actions, which appeared to be the customary greeting for someone of high standing.

How stupid.

"No, it is quite all right." The director gave a polite laugh, covering her mouth with her free hand. "No offense taken at all. And please, Arthur, call me Cynthia. I'm sorry to intrude on you at such a late hour," she explained, looking at my parents, "but unfortunately, the only free time I could find was after my meeting tonight. I hope you don't mind."

"No, no, of course not—we're thankful that you'd be willing to take the time to visit our son." My father was the one to speak this time.

Given the formality the adults were displaying, I was beginning to wonder if this granny was someone like Grandpa Virion.

The director—Cynthia—nodded at this. "True. It isn't often that I make a home visit for a potential student. Even if I had a hundred bodies, I wouldn't be able to find the time. However," she continued, "Vincent is a good friend and has contributed greatly to Xyrus Academy. So when he told me about a

prodigy living in his home, I became excited as well. I must say that my curiosity got the best of me. Do you mind leading me to an open space so I can see a demonstration?" Her gaze was fixed on me, assessing me as she spoke.

"Can I at least eat din—ow!" My mother had slapped me in the butt before I could finish my sentence.

"Of course! Please follow us, Director Cynthia." My mother ushered me to the patio, leading Director Cynthia, and the others followed behind us.

My dinner…

Sylvie, who had been hiding from the unfamiliar human underneath the dinner table, trotted behind me. Director Cynthia raised an eyebrow when she spotted her.

"Oh my… What a lovely mana beast. I assume it is your contracted beast, Arthur?" she asked inquisitively, kneeling down to get a closer view of Sylvie.

"Yeah, she hatched a few months ago. Her name is Sylvie," I responded simply. My mother's hand still gripped the back of my shirt to keep me from escaping.

"I must say, it is common for nobles to buy beasts to contract, but I have never seen a mana beast like yours."

Shrugging my shoulders, I said, "I'm not exactly sure what she is either. Her mother was some sort of scaly wolf-like creature. She was already gravely wounded when I stumbled into her nest. She was protecting her egg."

She stretched out a hand, but Sylvie scampered away and climbed on top of my head before Cynthia could pet her.

"Sorry, she's a bit shy around strangers."

"I see. Well, enough about her. Let us see if Vincent wasn't just exaggerating. He didn't tell me much except that you're an augmenter, saying the rest would be a surprise." She gave a wry smile, making Vincent blush.

In the backyard everyone took their seats, leaving us plenty of space. Sylvie

struggled to escape the grasp of my little sister, to whom I had entrusted her.
"You're not going to use your wand?" I asked as I started stretching.
"It wouldn't be fair of me to use a weapon when you yourself are empty-handed, would it?"
She had a point.
I stomped my right foot into the ground, raising a stone the size of my body. I stood nonchalantly, both hands in my pockets, and kicked the rock in Director Cynthia's direction.
A wind wall appeared instantly in front of her, knocking the boulder high into the air.
I let out a sharp whistle, impressed by the speed of her casting. The fact that she didn't have to rely on verbal aid to manifest such a spell showed her level as a mage. She clearly wasn't the type of director who just sat in front of her desk, signing papers.
Her brows were raised in surprise at the sudden attack I had thrown at her, but she maintained her composure. Still, I could tell she hadn't been expecting an elemental attack from me, especially since she knew I was an augmenter.
I willed a gust of wind underneath my feet and propelled myself to her.
Her expression grew even more surprised when I easily jumped ten feet into the air, with the help of my wind attribute skill, as a swirling whirlwind enveloped my right fist. I pushed off the deflected boulder just as it began to fall back to the ground, hoping to gain enough momentum to break through her barrier.
Our spells collided, creating an erratic wind current and forcing our audience to shield their faces.
The collision blew me back, but Director Cynthia remained steady on her feet. Before I could regain my composure, the director had already made her next move; gusts of wind swirled around her, shaping themselves into four twisters, each the size of a small tree. With no visible command from her, the

twisters shot toward me.

Gathering wind-attribute mana, I willed a small tornado to form around me, spinning in the opposite direction of Director Goodsky's spell. Using the centrifugal force generated by my cyclone, I began spinning along with it, creating blades of wind with my hands.

The clash between the four twisters and my cyclone created a small crater, but otherwise didn't do me any harm.

"Impressive. Vincent, it seems, did not exaggerate."

Instantly I was knocked back, my ears ringing and my vision unsteady. She was a deviant—a sound mage at that.

I steadied myself, glancing at my opponent, who stared back at me with a mildly impressed expression.

My head began spinning, trying to think of different possible moves I could use to win, but seeing the raging sphere of wind gathering around her hand, I knew she had me in a checkmate. Suppressing my pride and stubbornness, I took a seat on the ground, admitting defeat.

"That should be enough for a demonstration, right, Director?" I rubbed my temples.

"Yes," she murmured, "that is quite sufficient." There was a long pause as she studied me with newfound interest.

She seemed to come to a decision, and was making her way toward me when I heard my father's voice.

"Arthur, you can use earth and wind attribute spells too?"

"What do you mean, 'too'?" Director Cynthia interrupted, her composed look giving way to one of confusion.

My mother continued for my baffled father. "He—our son—we thought he was a fire elemental. He's a deviant as well—he can use lightning magic."

I could hear Director Cynthia's breath catch, and for the first time, her expression was one of someone truly in shock.

"Surely you jest. You mean to say he is capable of controlling three

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elements?'"

"Four, actually. I can control all four," I cut in. Everyone was going to find out anyway. This wasn't something that I could hide—nor did I want to. "Earth and wind are my weakest elements. I'm a lot more adept at controlling fire and water. I also happen to be deviant in both of those elements, but I've just begun training in them."

No one responded to my announcement; the only sound was the clichéd chirp of crickets. It was understandable that they'd be this surprised, but I was getting tired of all the shocked expressions.

I got to my feet, shaking off the dizziness from her previous attack. I hadn't been expecting a sound-user so I hadn't bothered enhancing my ears. Thankfully, the spell seemed to have targeted only me, but the director was quite cruel, I thought. If I hadn't already gone through assimilation, my hearing could have been badly damaged.

Now this noble figure, the woman who controlled the most prominent school on the continent, stumbled forward, barely making it to a chair. Then, unexpectedly, she began laughing. It started out as a low chuckle, but soon escalated into a wild laugh of what sounded to me like sheer joy.

Finally, turning back to me as she composed herself, she said, "Arthur, at the risk of repeating you—you are a quadra-elemental, capable of controlling two higher elements. Is that correct?"

I'm also a dragon tamer, but that's about it, I thought, and wondered how they would react if I told them that. But I resisted the temptation. "Correct," I answered, not bothering to elaborate.

"Please demonstrate." Director Cynthia's eyes grew menacing and the once friendly-looking grandmother now had the air of a veteran killer as she raised her hand, the mana around her fluctuating.

A vacuum of wind began sucking me toward her, and a visible sphere of wind formed in her other palm.

This woman…

I willed water into my right palm and a condensed ball of fire in my left. *She wants to see so badly; I'll just have to show her.*

Combining the opposing magics, I created a massive cloud of steam, completely enshrouding the two of us from everyone else's sight.

The cloud of steam didn't last long against her, but it did give me enough time to create a spear of ice. I threw the spear just as the steam dissipated, then quickly repositioned myself. As I expected, the director easily blocked my ice spear just as I came in range to strike, my fist encased in lightning. But before I could, I was blown away once more by a powerful sound wave. Fortunately, I had reinforced mana over my ears, but there was no way for me to get near her.

"Whew! I must say, I am thoroughly convinced! You pass, Arthur Leywin." She clapped her hands, the sharp sound of which was dulled as it washed up against my protected ears.

Getting back up, I dusted myself off. This demonstration had left me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was frustrated that there were combatants I couldn't even touch, let alone defeat. However, for the first time, I began seriously considering the potential value of learning at Xyrus. If I could have a professor whose strength was even close to Director Goodsky's level, my magic would grow by leaps and bounds.

"I'm sorry for hiding this from you," I said, turning to my parents. I was a bit worried that they might be angry with me for keeping this from them, but fortunately, my father took it pretty well.

"My son is the first ever quadra-elemental!" He scooped me up by the armpits and swung me around like he had done when I was an infant. Traumatic memories began popping up.

"Please, Art, no more secrets," my mother said with a wry smile, concern still etched on her face.

I couldn't promise her that. I tried to convince myself it was for her protection, not for my convenience.

"Forget a quadra-elemental—on this continent, there aren't even any *tri*-elementals other than you, Art," Tabitha chimed in, her voice trailing off into a sigh.

"Is my brother strong?" my sister chimed in, still clutching Sylvie.

Patting her on the head, the director nodded. "Your brother has the ability to become very strong indeed, little one."

Ellie giggled, a proud look on her face, as if she were the one being complimented.

Vincent's face was a picture of disbelief. He was still processing everything. Lilia waved her hand in front of his face, making sure her father was all right before shooting a quick glance in my direction. Her face bore a mixture of astonishment and a little fear.

I didn't blame her.

When my father set me down I turned to Director Cynthia, giving her a stern gaze, a gaze that I knew didn't belong on an eight-year-old's face.

"Director Goodsky, there's a reason I didn't hide my capabilities today."

Picking up on the seriousness in my voice, she nodded in understanding. "I had a hunch you weren't just brazenly showing off, Arthur. You seem too sharp for that."

I nodded in agreement and continued. "There are only a few benefits I can reap from attending your school. One is learning how to utilize my lightning and ice elements. However, that is something I can learn on my own in due time. The main reason I would attend your academy, *if* I choose to do so at all, is for protection. Right now, I'm not strong enough to protect everyone. However, you hold a position of power and influence that can provide safety for my family and me, at least until I develop the strength to protect them myself."

"Arthur! You're being rude to Director Goodsky! How can you—"

"No, it's fine, Alice." The director mumbled a soft chant before speaking again. "Arthur, I believe you hold the ability to make incredible changes in

this world. For that reason, if you're willing to attend Xyrus Academy, become a rightful citizen, and pledge to protect this land, then I will abide by any criteria you set."

Director Goodsky's voice was clear and determined, but I noticed confused looks on the faces all around us, and although I could see my parents' mouths moving, I couldn't hear their voices. I could only assume that Director Goodsky had created a bubble of silence around us.

Turning back to her, I met her gaze solemnly. "Very well. I will study what I feel is valuable from the classes your school offers and will train my own powers. As long as you give me the tools and freedom to do so, and keep my loved ones safe, I will consider you an important benefactor," I promised.

Director Goodsky's lips curved up into a smile, and we shook hands. I was suddenly able to hear everyone else's voices again. When I looked at the director, she gave me a wink.

Clarifying for the others, I said loudly, "I will abide by our agreement—*when* I enroll in your academy."

"Oh? Were you not planning on enrolling anytime soon?" The director had a puzzled look on her face, as did the other adults.

"I don't plan to enroll in Xyrus Academy until I reach the age at which normal students attend. I've decided to enter your academy on my twelfth birthday—a very average age for one to begin. I assume that will not be a problem?" I tilted my head.

"Goodness! That's a little more than three years. Arthur, what do you plan to do in the meantime?"

I had figured Director Goodsky wouldn't be accepting of my desire to postpone my education for so long.

I turned to face my parents again, since it would be up to them to allow me or not.

I looked up at the night sky, at the stars shining brightly. It was so unlike my old world. The lack of bright lights here made the star-glittered night truly

beautiful. Turning my gaze back to my family, I answered.
"I'd like to become an adventurer."

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20

EVERYBODY WINS

"No! Absolutely no way! Arthur! Do you know how dangerous it is to become an adventurer? You've just returned, after we all thought you were dead, and now you're saying you want to go get yourself killed out there? No way! Absolutely not."

My mother was on the verge of tears—she had never been good at controlling her emotions. Eleanor was beside her, clutching at her leg.

"Mama, don't be angry. Brother's not bad! Mama, don't cry."

Director Goodsky had left the manor after my announcement. I could tell she still had a lot of questions she wanted to ask, but we excused ourselves to have a family talk. We were in my parent's room, with my mother pacing back and forth in front of me, forbidding me to even think about doing anything remotely dangerous.

Father was a bit more rational. I could tell he didn't like the idea either, but he couldn't really see any reason for me not to be an adventurer, other than my age.

I wasn't going to debate with my mother. She was saying these things because she was worried, and I could never blame her for that—it was what I had expected. I had wanted to slowly ease her into the idea, but the meeting with Director Goodsky had thrown off the timing of everything.

My father finally broke his silence and spoke up. "Honey, let's hear Arthur out, at least. I'm not saying I agree with him becoming an adventurer, but

don't you think we should at least listen to what he has to say?"

"How can you still say that, after what happened that day?" my mother yelled, breaking down into a fit of sobs.

I looked to my father for answers, unable to think of the appropriate words, but he simply shook his head as he pressed my mother's head against his chest.

It seemed like a good hour before she had calmed down enough to speak again.

I grabbed my mother's hands. "Mom, I wasn't planning on leaving tomorrow. I'm looking forward to spending a few months here at home with you all."

She was still silent, but her face softened a little. I just gave her a warm smile, and Sylvie followed suit and began licking her hand.

"What I meant by becoming an adventurer was that it would be a good way for me to get some experience. Being in the elf kingdom for three years, I've missed the opportunity to learn many little lessons, the things an eight-year-old should know about this world of ours. I just thought that becoming an adventurer would be the best way to gain some practical experience," I urged, not letting go of Mother's hands.

"I understand where you're coming from, Arthur. Although I was a bit older, I was also itching to get some real-life experience in fighting as soon as I awakened as a mage," my father reminisced. "But your mother is also right in that it is dangerous, and unpredictable."

My mother nodded her head vigorously at this.

I stayed silent for a little bit while I pondered. Then I said, "Dad. Mom. What if I were to have some sort of guard or supervisor with me? Would that make you feel more at ease with the idea?"

"Hmm… You know, that's not a bad idea." I could almost see the gears in my father's head turning as he began thinking of potential candidates.

"But I still wouldn't be able to see you for three years," my mother began to

protest.

Shaking my head, I said, "Mom, I'm not going to go on long trips or dangerous missions to faraway places. I'll try to come back every few months, maybe even more frequently than that, depending on what I do."

"Brother, are you leaving?" My sister's expression was utterly crestfallen.

I started to panic. "No, not now, Ellie—I'm staying here for a long time. You'll be sick of me by the time I have to go."

Both my mother and father had told Eleanor stories about me and how strong and smart I was. One of Ellie's favorite bedtime stories was how I saved Mother from a bunch of bad guys on top of a cliff and that I got hurt, so it would take me some time to come back home. Eventually, I had become a hero figure to my sister.

I looked back at my mother. Her face was considerably more at ease after talking about this. Perhaps she had just jumped to the worst-case scenario and had envisioned me setting off alone to face unspeakable dangers.

"Why do you want to be an adventurer before going to school anyways? Isn't it usually the opposite?" my mother asked softly.

"Dad's reason was a part of it; I want to test my skills out in real-life situations. Also, Mom, I want to at least try to fit in with everyone when I go to school. It would be a lot harder to fit in if I start school when I'm only eight. I don't think I'll be able to make many friends with such a big age difference."

It was a pitiful excuse, but, for once, my mother's look was one of understanding. I guess having her child become a friendless loner is every mother's worst nightmare. And it wasn't really a lie, either, because I said it thinking of Sylvia's dying wish. She had wanted me to enjoy myself and have a life—not spend all my time just training. That was a promise I planned to keep, no matter what.

"Besides," I continued, "I'm going to be here for a couple of months anyway. Who knows, maybe you'll get sick of me by then and throw me out before I

even get the chance to leave." I winked at my mother.
That earned me a thump on the head, but she chuckled as well. "You! You're just like your father at times. Thank God you at least have my intelligence." She gave me a big hug, and I was filled with a warm feeling that I wasn't used to.
"Hey! What about my intelligence? He was gifted with my adept abilities in fire, too," my father protested.
"Hmph! *My* son got his deviant powers from me." Mother turned me away from my father and stuck her tongue out at him.
"Ellie too! Bleh!" My sister copied my mother, sticking her tongue out at my beleaguered father.
"No one is ever on my side," he cried playfully, trying to hug Ellie as we all laughed.
The next day was a rest day, meaning my father had the day off. The Leywin and Helstea families were dining together for breakfast. "Did you decide what to do about Arthur?" Vincent asked around his mouthful of omelet.
Tabitha shook her head. "I swear. I have such a hard time believing you're a noble sometimes, dear, with your horrible dining habits."
"Don't worry," my mother sighed. "At least your husband's better than mine. Remember that dinner party when Rey laughed so hard he spat his food across the table? I had to use Ellie as an excuse to leave the table because I was so embarrassed."
"Anyway!" My father blushed slightly and tried to change the topic. "Yes, Vince. After talking about it last night, we have agreed to let him become an adventurer—under some conditions."
"Oh? What conditions?" Tabitha asked curiously, cutting Lilia's omelet into smaller pieces.
"He's not going to become an adventurer until after his birthday, which is in three months. He's also going to have a guard with him on his missions. Aside from that, I think he'll be smart enough to manage on his own. And the

last condition, of course, is that he'll be visiting as often as possible," my father finished, working on the rest of his roast beef.

"Do you have anyone in mind for his guard? *Is* there even a guard who's capable of the job? I feel like Arthur would be the one protecting the guard." Vince chuckled at the ridiculous idea of an eight-year-old protecting a grown, veteran adventurer.

My mother answered him, looking at my father. "Rey and I thought we could use one of the Helstea Auction House guards, but we haven't come up with anyone who meets the criteria yet."

"Can I have more omelet please?" my sister chimed in, her fork raised in the air.

"I got it!" My father's sudden revelation made him jump up, and I almost choked on my mouthful of meat.

"The Twin Horns will be coming back from a dungeon expedition. I received a letter from the Adventurers Guild Hall that says they should be back in about two months. It's perfect! Why did it take me so long to think of that? We can just have one of the Twin Horns look after you, Arthur. You still remember them, right?" My father's eyes were shining with excitement.

"That's not a bad idea," my mother said, her voice implying the rarity of my father having a good idea.

I fed a morsel of meat to Sylvie, who was perched on my lap with her two front paws on the table. "Of course I remember them," I said. "That sounds like a great idea, Dad. Do they know I'm back?"

"No—unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to send a message to them yet. I was planning to do that today." My father sat back down, scratching his head, then went back to his roast beef.

Having finished off his breakfast, Vincent joined in the conversation. "Arthur, you mentioned something to Director Cynthia yesterday about not showing your powers to anyone until you enroll into Xyrus Academy. How do you plan to manage that while you're an adventurer?"

"Ah, yes. I've been meaning to get to that," I said, spearing a strawberry with my fork. "I planned on keeping my identity hidden. I've read that many members of the Adventurers Guild go by aliases, not revealing their identities to the public." Unfortunately, there was no way to mask Sylvie's appearance, so I would just have to do a good job of hiding her. Thankfully, she was small enough to fit inside a cloak, if the pocket was big enough.

Vincent turned to my father. "That reminds me of Lawrence. Rey, do remember him?"

My father succumbed to a fit of strained laughter, nearly choking on his mouthful of food. Finally, he managed to swallow it. "You mean that oaf who got beaten with a ladle by his wife in the middle of the escort mission, after she found out that he was taking advantage of his hidden identity to fool around with other women? Man, the whole town got a good laugh out of that."

"Good times," Vincent sighed, still chuckling nostalgically.

I snickered as well, imagining the comedic scene, while Tabitha and my mother berated their husbands and warned me not to be as foolish as Lawrence.

After breakfast, Father went to the Guild Hall to send a message to his old party members, and my mother and Tabitha went shopping, taking Ellie and Lilia along with them. They asked me to come as well, but I politely declined their offer to endure the suffering they considered a pastime.

I washed up and headed toward the right wing of the manor, where Vincent's office was, and knocked on his door.

"Yes?"

"It's Arthur," I said.

The door opened to reveal Vincent with a curious look on his face. "Ah, come in! What brings you to my office, Arthur?"

"Ah yes," I said, looking around at the piles of documents on the floor and on his desk. "There is a certain matter I wish to talk to you about today, which is

why I visited."

VINCENT HELSTEA

Is this child really only eight years old?

Shivers ran down my spine at his tone of voice. Why was I so nervous at the mention of a 'certain matter' he wanted to discuss?

"What is it?" I asked, my face turning a bit more serious.

"I would like your help in obtaining a few items that might be hard to find elsewhere." He sat down and continued, looking straight at me. "I need a sturdy, hooded cloak or robe and a mask that can cover my entire face. It's imperative that the mask has the added function of changing my voice."

It wasn't hard to figure out why he wanted these items. And as owner of the Helstea Auction House, which attracted the highest of nobles and even the royal family, it wouldn't be too hard for me to obtain them. The mask might be a little tricky because a sound elemental artificer would need to make it, but it could be done.

But why was there such a heavy feeling in this room?

I couldn't quite place my finger on it…

That's it!

Why did this eight-year-old child have the type of aura I had only ever felt in the presence of the King of Sapin himself?

No, that wasn't right—the atmosphere in this room was even *heavier* than what I had experienced when I was with the king.

He was clearly asking me for a favor. But it felt like he was gauging me, almost as if he were trying to evaluate whether to put me on his list of 'people to keep alive.'

I hadn't felt this from him before—perhaps because I had only ever seen him in the company of his family.

I quickly replied, wanting to get it over with. "It shouldn't be a problem getting those things. The mask might take a bit of time, but I'm sure we'll

have it before you become an adventurer."

His slight nod filled me with relief. I had nobles waiting in line to introduce themselves to me, but this child…

"And what would you require in exchange? I wouldn't like to just ask for this without offering any compensation," he responded.

I felt a little sweat forming above my brows. "It's fine, really. I owe your father a lot. He may be working for me, but the way he trains my guards has really reduced the number of problems during the auctions."

This was the truth. Rey had become an irreplaceable part of the Helstea Auction Houses. His leadership, charisma, and rapport with the guards he trained was first class. I had owed him for saving my life, and I felt I still owed him—and his family. Even with his generous salary—which was well above the average—and letting his family stay in our house, I still felt I was getting a bargain. Tabitha and Lilia had been happier than ever after Rey and Alice moved in and had Ellie. I'd always felt guilty about not being able to spend as much time with my family as they wanted, but things were a lot better now.

"Speaking of training," he muttered, looking down, "that gives me an idea."

When Arthur started thinking, he got a certain look. His gaze went unfocused and his brows furrowed; the subtle crease near his lips and the slight twitch of his nose gave the appearance that he was thinking of something beyond what normal human intelligence would be capable of. It was the look of a true intellectual.

It was hard to believe he was the same age as my little Lilia.

"Allow me to start training your daughter to become a mage." He dropped this landmine as if he was just talking about the weather.

ARTHUR

"I intend to start giving my baby sister lessons in mana manipulation soon. It wouldn't be too much trouble to include Lilia in this training. I notice that neither you nor Lady Tabitha are mages, so it might be impossible for her to

awaken by herself, but if we start now, I think she'll be able to awaken at the average age," I said.

My statement was met with silence. I looked up to see that Vincent had dropped the stack of papers he had been fumbling with. His face was frozen and I could hear his heart beating faster.

"Did I hear you right? Can you really train my daughter to become a m-mage?" he asked after a long moment of silence.

"Of course. It'll be a long process, but it's definitely possible. Not certain," I said honestly, "but possible. I will have to ask you to keep a low profile on the lessons, though. I would hate to be bombarded with doting parents asking me to make their children into mages." I chuckled, trying to lighten the tension.

He nodded furiously, but failed to form a coherent sentence. "Sincerely," he finally managed to stammer, "there would be no greater happiness for me than seeing my daughter become a mage." His eyes were brimming with tears, on the verge of falling.

"Great. Then I'll leave the items we discussed to you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll see myself out. My apologies for intruding on your work."

Picking up the sleeping Sylvie from my lap, I let myself out of the room.

That worked out well.

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21

FOR THEM

LILIA HELSTEA

I was shopping with Mommy and Lady Alice and Ellie. Ellie seemed a little bit disappointed that her brother didn't want to join us, so I was holding her hand to comfort her.

"Ellie, do you like your big brother that much?"

"Yes! But he's a meanie for not shopping with us. I wanted to dress him up more," she pouted.

"Who do you like better, me or your big brother?"

After thinking for some time, she responded, "I like you both."

"What are you girls talking about?" my mom asked, pulling my other hand. "Lilia, what do you think of Arthur?"

"He's a little scary. How is he so strong, Mommy? I thought kids like us couldn't be mages until we're all grown up." It wasn't fair. I had always dreamed of becoming a mage and making Mommy and Papa happy.

"I guess it's because he's a very gifted child," Mommy said. Then she looked at Lady Alice, and seemed to forget about me. "Alice, do you really have no problems with everything he told you? I don't mean to overstep, but doesn't it seem just a little weird? You told me he was good at fighting even before the bandit attack, but how did he get so powerful during the time he was away?"

I saw Lady Alice shake her head. "Of course I know he's hiding a lot of

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things. He probably doesn't realize it, but it's pretty obvious when he's lying. He tends to focus his gaze on one point and his voice turns monotone when he lies. It's pretty cute, how he thinks he's being sneaky." She sighed. "Tabitha, I know he's keeping things from us and so does Rey, but we agreed to give him some space until he's comfortable enough to tell us himself. I guess that's just what it means to be a parent. I know he doesn't mean any harm, so all we can do is just support him until he's ready."

"Lying is bad," Ellie declared.

I agreed with her on that. "Yeah, Ellie. Lying *is* bad!"

ARTHUR LEYWIN

I start concentrating on my mana core, but I was distracted by a series of inexplicable sneezes. I was getting impatient with my training. I was eager reach the level I'd been at in my past life, but that wasn't happening as quickly as I wanted it to.

The fight with Director Goodsky had made it all too real for me. I was too inexperienced and weak. It hadn't really affected me until now, but I wasn't used to fighting the way mages fought in this world. The fact that there was nothing like conjurers in my previous world made fighting one a lot more difficult.

My concentration wavered as my mind flashed back to my past life. The scene on that foggy night when the head caretaker of the orphanage, the closest thing to a mother figure I'd had, had been shot. I had been young, but thinking back on it, that was probably the reason I had started training like a madman. Headmaster Wilbeck had picked me off the streets, giving me a steamed bun. After that, she took care of me, taught me how to read and write, scolded me, and taught me basic manners. And then they had killed her.

I hadn't wanted to become a king; I'd just wanted to be strong enough to kill the ones responsible for the death of the person who had taken care of me—

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who had loved me. It was never as simple as that, though.
Eventually, I learned that the ones responsible for killing the headmaster were agents from another country, on a mission to find certain special individuals. Several other headmasters were also murdered, becoming martyrs in a secret war. Unfortunately, I wasn't to discover the truth of this until it was much too late.
I had realized then that no matter how powerful an individual was, he was still just one person. I needed authority along with my strength. Becoming king, then, served that purpose. The first thing I had done when I was appointed king was avenge Headmaster Wilbeck's death. I obliterated the organization responsible and laid waste to the country that had sent them. I'd bloodied my hands with the corpses of hundreds of thousands of soldiers—millions all together. The cruel truth, though, was that no matter what kind of revenge I took, it didn't change what had happened. Headmaster Wilbeck had still died an unjust death. Worse, in my quest for vengeance, the blood of the only people who'd still mattered to me had been spilt, leaving me alone in a large and bleak world.
This life was going to be different. I wasn't going to let the ones I treasured suffer.
Sylvie nudged me with her wet nose, her concerned gaze fixed on my eyes as if to say, 'I'm here, feel better.'
Petting her head, I stirred myself out of my unpleasant memories.
I washed myself off, laughing at the crying Sylvie, who still hated getting wet. I was glad I had her by my side. It wasn't healthy for me to be alone with my thoughts for too long.
The ladies came back from their shopping trip just as I finished dressing. I hopped down the stairs to greet them.
"Hmph! Brother is a meanie!" My sister just puckered her lower lip with her arms crossed.
"Because I didn't go shopping with you, Ellie? I'm sorry." I patted her turned

head, and she tensed her face as she forced herself to keep from smiling.
"How was shopping, Mom, Lady Tabitha? Did you get a lot of stuff?" I asked, my hand still on my sister's head.
"Not much, just a few new outfits for Ellie and Lilia," my mother responded.
I heard a storm of footsteps coming toward us. Vincent arrived beside us, his excitement obvious. His eyes were a little red and he couldn't contain the smile on his face.
"You're finally here!" He picked up his daughter and kissed her cheek.
"Honey, why are you so flustered? Have you been crying? What is going on?" Tabitha looked bewildered. I couldn't blame her for being confused and worried; Vince did look a little crazy.
"You didn't tell them yet, Arthur?" He faced me, the goofy smile still pasted on his face.
Shaking my head, I said, "I was about to. I just got down as well."
"Tell us what, baby?" My mother looked concerned. Mothers never liked not knowing what was going on.
"Vincent and I were talking about teaching Ellie and Lilia mana manipulation, starting today. Of course, only if Lady Tabitha is okay with it." Tabitha shook her head, looking at her husband. "Wait. Is this some sort of prank? If it is, it's not funny."
"No, ma'am. I know neither you nor Sir Vincent are mages, but it is possible for Lilia to become one." I gave her a sincere look.
"I've never heard of a method for teaching someone mana manipulation. I've been taught that it's up to the child's innate talent to awaken by itself. Why haven't I heard of anyone else teaching children?"
It was hard to convince Tabitha that Lilia could become a mage; she was more skeptical than Vincent had been. I didn't blame her, though. Vincent hadn't even questioned me, which was surprising. The biggest worry for a mother of a noble family was the future of her children, and in a society where mages were the elites, the Helstea lineage, no matter how rich they

were, would earn more than a few looks of pity.
"I've never heard of it either, Art. How do you plan on doing this?" my mother asked quizzically.
"Mom, remember how I awakened at the age of three? Well, I can still remember what happened and why it worked. So I'm going to do to them what I did on myself. I'll have to test them before I can even start—but for Ellie, I'm a hundred percent sure she'll be able awaken, and for Lilia, around seventy percent," I answered. The probability was higher than that for Lilia, but I didn't want to get their hopes up too much. There was still a chance she wouldn't be able to awaken.
"Heavens. This… this is… Give me a minute. I need to sit down." Tabitha's knees were wobbling as she made her way to the couch.
"This isn't going to be an instant thing. It'll take a few years for them to awaken on their own even after I teach them."
The Helstea parents just nodded at this, so I turned toward the confused faces of Lilia and Ellie.
"Ellie, Lilia, can you go sit down on the floor over by the fireplace?" I instructed, guiding them into the living room. "I want you both to sit in your most comfortable position, back to back. Leave some space so I can sit in between."
Ellie was still a little clueless as to what was going on, but Lilia had gotten the gist of what was happening, and I could see the determined look on her face. Ellie sat down with her legs stuck out in front of her, while Lilia sat in a more ladylike position, her legs tucked to her left side.
"Now, before I do anything, I want you both to close your eyes and concentrate. If you try really hard, you'll be able see some spots of light. Do you see it?" I placed myself between them now. Tabitha, Vincent, and my mother were all staring intently.
"No… I don't really see anything," I heard Lilia murmur. I had expected as much, but I caught looks of panic on the adults' faces. Ignoring them, I

turned to my sister and asked her the same thing. I was confident she would be able to see the light, but wasn't sure she would recognize what to actually look for.

But she replied, "Brother, I think I see a small pretty light!"

The next step involved something that only I was capable of doing. I had to will the mana of all four elemental attributes into their bodies at once. By doing this, they would be able to more clearly see the specks of mana scattered throughout their bodies. Because the mana in their bodies was in its undeveloped form, not yet in a mana core, all four elements needed to be delivered at the same intensity to trigger a response from the dormant mana inside them.

"I'm going to start now. You may feel a little feverish, but I want you to endure it and just focus on the specks of light." As I spoke, I placed a hand on each girl's back and willed my quadra-elemental mana into them.

Lilia and Ellie both let out little yelps of surprise.

"I think I see the lights!" exclaimed Lilia. "They're so pretty."

"Wow! So many!" echoed my little sister.

"Now, this part is important. I'm going to help you, but your job is to try and connect all of the little lights, all right? Do you understand, Ellie? Pretend that all the little lights are friends and they need to be together. Can you do that for me, Ellie?" This was the trickiest and lengthiest part, and I had to make sure they understood what to do.

"I think I get it," Lilia said, and Ellie added, "The lights are friends? Okay!"

I remained in my position for over an hour to trigger the dormant mana in their bodies, at least to the point that the specks would be visible enough for them to manipulate and gather.

Then, taking a deep breath, I removed my hands from their backs, instructing them to continue gathering the little lights until the lights disappeared.

"How is it? Do you think Lilia will be able to become a mage?" Both Helstea parents were a mess. They were clearly anxious, and Vincent was nervously

chewing on a fingernail. I looked at my mother; even she had a hint of uneasiness in her eyes.

I responded with a wide smile. "Don't worry. They should both awaken as mages within a few years. My plan is to do this with them every day for the few months that I'll be home. By then, they should be capable of training on their own to form a mana c—"

Tabitha didn't even let me finish; she swept me up into a big hug. "Oh, thank you, thank you, *thank you*! My baby will be able to learn magic! Oh, my goodness—I was so worried what her future would be, since neither of us are mages. Oh! Thank you so much, Arthur."

Tears were streaming down Vincent's face, and he kept his gaze on his daughter as she meditated. My mother patted my head silently, giving me a proud smile.

It wasn't as big a deal for Ellie to become a mage, since our whole family could use magic. The chances of her never awakening would have been slim to none even if I hadn't done anything; I was just speeding up the process. My thinking was, the faster she learned magic, the faster she'd be able to protect herself.

The two girls lasted a few hours before the mana I had exerted dispersed from their bodies. Surprisingly, Lilia lasted longer than Ellie. She had more willpower than my four-year-old sister.

My father came home from the Guild Hall shortly thereafter and was ecstatic that the Helstea family was going to have its first mage.

Picking up Eleanor and rubbing his beard on her cheek, my father cooed, "My little baby is going to be strong like her older brother! But promise me you won't be stronger than Father, okay? Or he'll be very sad."

My mother laughed at this and my sister just giggled, pushing Father's face away. "Papa! Your beard tickles. Stop!"

We had a wonderful dinner party that night. Vincent and Tabitha went all out on the delicacies, leaving my mouth watering. Sylv drooled right next to me.

The night ended with everyone merry, Vincent going around offering drinks to even the maids and butlers.

The following days consisted of me condensing my mana core and my elemental skills, along with my dragon-will powers. This was a mind-numbingly slow process, and I felt myself stagnating because of the lack of stimulation.

I spent a few days during the week sparring with Father, but I could tell he was afraid of hurting me, always holding back even when it was unnecessary.

Aside from my training, I spent a couple of hours every day watching over my sister and Lilia while they continued on their journey to form their cores. It was a strenuous process, and I could see that my sister was a bit more impatient with the training, so I did my best to help her through it by making games out of it.

I also tried talking to my mother about her abilities as an emitter. I asked how she had learned it and trained in it when there were so few emitters, but she only smiled at me mysteriously, saying a woman needed to have a few secrets of her own.

I made a note to ask her again when she was feeling less secretive.

Two weeks before my birthday and the start of my career as an adventurer, I was startled one afternoon by loud, obnoxious knocks on the front door. When I opened the door and saw the all-too-familiar faces on the step, I couldn't hold back my smile.

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